# The Green Curve

OLE LUK-OIE

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## *And Other Stories*

BY

OLE LUK-OIE

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# Preface.

THESE sketches were originally written for the entertainment of soldiers. As a larger section of the general public now appears to be interested in warfare than was formerly the case, they are republished in a collected form in the hope that they may appeal to a somewhat wider circle.

The author's thanks are due to the Editor of 'Blackwood's Magazine' for permission to reprint all but one of the sketches; for permission to reprint this one the author is indebted to the Editor of 'Macmillan's Magazine.'

As some of the stories deal with matters in which there has been considerable development since the period at which the stories were written, the dates of their first appearance are given.

"The Kite" was published in June 1906, "The Joint in the Harness" in January 1907, and "An Eddy of War" in April 1907. The latter story was written in collaboration with the late "C. V."

"OLE LUK-OIE"

*March* 1909.

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# The Green Curve.

"Je créai six commissaires pour faire la description des bouches inutiles, et après bailler ce rôle à un chevalier de Saint-Jean de Malte, accompagné de 25 ou 30 soldats, pour les mettre dehors. . . .

"Ce sont les lois de la guerre; il faut être cruel bien souvent pour venir à bout de son ennemi; Dieu doit être bien miséricordieux en notre droit, qui faisons tant de maux."—MONTLUC, 'Siege of Sienna.'

## I.

"YES, you certainly make a point there—but I'm afraid it cannot be done. I quite see, of course, that under certain circumstances it might be advisable from a purely military point of view; but there are also other considerations—weighty considerations, I may say,—and it cannot be done; at least, not at present." As he said these words the Minister put on his well-known smile—that smile which had disarmed so many.

"But if not possible at present, do you not think we ought to be prepared to take this step shortly—at a moment's notice?" replied the other.

"Yes; in so far as measures can be taken that will not cause excitement. You see—I'll be frank with you"—here the set smile again showed the teeth of the speaker under his carefully waxed

black moustache—"we cannot do it on account of the result that such action may have on the Public,—we cannot afford to do it. The People are ignorant of any such necessity, and would not understand. They are of course still quite confident, I hope not unreasonably, and look upon the rosy side of affairs——"

"Yes; remember the Parisians and their cry of 'A Berlin!' Remember——" interrupted the ex-general.

But the Minister held up his hand and continued sonorously: "And look upon the rosy side of things, as I say. Such an extreme—not to say drastic—step would certainly inflict great hardships on non-combatants, and would excite apprehension. It would be bound to have an adverse effect on the Government. Believe me, we have considered the matter from all sides. Of course, I quite understand and, I hope, appreciate the line you are taking up: all the military advisers have—perhaps quite naturally—urged similar forcible methods; but are not your fears somewhat groundless?"

At that moment there was a discreet tap at the door. A secretary entered and looked with a deferential air of inquiry at his Chief, who, seeing that he brought some papers, broke off his argument. The General bowed and strode to the window. As he stood reading with his back to the light his face was in shadow, but his attitude and manner of reading betokened a character the

antithesis of that of the man seated at the table, who was now immersed in the sheets just brought in.

The business, which consisted in mere signing, with now and then a word of explanation, did not take long. After a final "Yes, sir, quite," the secretary noiselessly vanished, and the Minister sat back, gently tapping his fingers together over his ample waistcoat. While endeavouring to recall the exact portion of his peroration reached before the interruption, he gazed benignly round the well-appointed room, which was large and had a long table in the centre. The number of despatch-boxes and the lavish display of official stationery upon the table showed it to be a Government office. As he sat tapping his finger-tips together, his cuffs made a rattling which at last attracted the attention of his more highly-strung companion at the window, who looked up with a frown. Seeing that the secretary had gone, he returned to the charge.

"I think you should read this. You have not seen it: it has only just reached me. It's his last letter, in which he again specifically discusses this very point. As you will see, he demonstrates once more that if things go at all against us, the place is bound to be besieged, and that either the useless civil population should be sent away now at once, or a very much larger food-supply stored there than has heretofore been arranged for or contemplated. He favours the former course, as

making matters simpler and easier for the defence. But see for yourself what he says,—the portion of his letter on this subject begins here. As you know, he is no alarmist, and his opinion, supporting as it does so many others, must surely carry great weight."

The Minister took the letter, but did not read. "I don't think it will do much good, General, my wading through all this,"—he flipped through the pages. "I know it all: I have seen former reports, and I don't suppose there's anything new. It represents the ultra-military point of view, which has been already considered. We have decided, if possible, quietly to increase the stock of food so as to provide for the whole population. Of course, if opportunity offers, we might—er—persuade a few old people to go; but we must wait till the Public realises the necessity for the move before doing anything on a large scale. Possibly people will then go readily and not have to be forced. Compulsion is always *so* undesirable in these matters. Then, perhaps, we might leave the matter to the discretion of the future military governor of the place: we should not like to commit him to any course beforehand, or to tie his hands!"

"But, quite apart from the great disadvantage of saddling that poor man with such a difficult question at a time when he will have so much else to do, I do not think you understand that it will increase the hardship ten thousandfold if

the wretched people have to be turned out once the town is invested. It will then practically mean the starvation of them all, and be an atrocity. Now it is possible and involves comparatively little hardship. Why not tell the Public the truth and act? Lead them, don't follow. Of course, they will acquiesce, once they realise the position."

"Oh, come, come," smiled the Minister, "isn't that a little strong? War is a brutal matter, but surely you don't imply that even were the place besieged the enemy would not allow the harmless civil population—non-combatants—a safe-conduct through their lines? You make our enemies out to be savages of the worst type. We live in different times from the siege of Jerusalem, you know! As to your last suggestion—why, it is not within the sphere of practical politics. Impossible—absolutely."

"I don't think you realise what War is. Starvation is one of the weapons of a besieger—as history has proved, one of the most powerful. If the opposing general conducting the siege were to assist the defenders by allowing them to send out their women and children after the siege has commenced, he would be a traitor to his country and should be shot! From what I know of our enemy's notions of war and of the character of the man who will probably undertake any siege, I do not think this likely. Have you read his last work, 'Væ Victis; or, The Ethics of War'?"

"No, I have not. I have no——"

"You should. I will send you a copy. It has just been translated. It treats of starvation as a weapon, and deals with the problem of '*Les Bouches Inutiles.*'"

"Thank you very much, but of course many men write things which they could not carry out in practice. I am afraid I should not be convinced by his theorising. Besides, if he is the ogre that you imagine, the commandant of the fortress will make his arrangements accordingly!"

"Yes—when it will be too late!" The speaker lost his patience. "So it is really the 'Public' that you rely on to judge when such a thing is necessary? The mob are the paid leaders and expert advisers of the nation? I can't help telling you that the Government are shirking their duty, but are not evading their responsibility, by trying to shelve the questions for some luckless general to settle when it is too late. I trust you may not have the blood of a large portion of the population, or of the whole garrison, on your hands, or be responsible for eventual defeat" He spoke bitterly.

"Tut-tut, my *dear* General," the speaker shrugged his shoulders in a deprecating way, "it's absurd—quite impossible to talk like this. I am so much obliged—I'm sure we all are—for the trouble you have taken, but I do not think any useful purpose can be served by our continuing this discussion or attempting to re-open the matter. Your views have my fullest sympathy I assure

you: I will bear in mind what you have said. It shall not be lost sight of. Meanwhile let us hope for the best!" He smiled again, and his third chin nestled into his wide collar with an air of finality.

The hint was plain. With a curt farewell the other went out, sore at heart.

The Minister turned his chair round to his table, and absently repeated the shibboleth—"We must hope for the best." But the catchword did not seem to convey comfort, for the smile had left his lips. It was some time before the busy scratching of his pen showed that he had once again got back into his stride, and was making his point in a masterly minute.

## II.

It was some weeks later: the storm had burst, and the war had gone badly. Winter had fastened upon the coast fortress and blizzard alternated with calm black frost; but far more paralysing than the grip of winter was the gradual constriction of the enemy's line of investment, for by land and sea the town was cut off from the world.

Upon a certain wild afternoon the office of the Military Governor and Fortress Commander looked gloomy and deserted,—silent but for the roaring of the fitful gusts in the chimney, and the distant booming of artillery which could be heard at intervals. Suddenly these dull, muffled sounds changed

to a shrill discord of wind whistling through the windows, as the door was thrown open and two soldiers entered. Before it could be closed a shower of papers fluttered from the table, and the powdery snow, which had been driven through the broken panes, scurried across the floor in wisps, turning to a dirty grey as it picked up the dust.

"That's the place," said the sergeant, as he pointed out a vacant space on the walls amidst the maps and proclamations with which they were covered, "made for it."

The private, whose mouth seemed full, only nodded and drew a hammer from his belt. Uncoiling a large roll they had brought with them, which was apparently a patchwork of small pieces of paper pasted together so as to form one sheet, they set to work. The sergeant whistled while he held it straight against the wall; the other, daintily drawing tin-tacks one by one from his mouth, nailed it up. After the last nail had been driven, and after a final stepping back to judge of the general effect, the remaining tacks were carefully ejected into a scrap of paper. No one could have accused these two of not being whole-hearted in their work, for they took much trouble over the exact position and alignment of the ugly diagram now nailed up.

"Doesn't look so bad after all; but I'll just thicken up the green a bit, as I have it on me," said the senior, taking a chalk-pencil from behind his ear. "Yes, that does it. The Colonel said

it was to be plain and prominently placed. It is plain, it is prominent, and — it's neat. We've made a job of it." He sucked his pencil and cocked his head on one side critically.

The well-worn platitude that the main points —the great issues of affairs—are often lost sight of by those immersed in working out the details was well illustrated at this moment. These two men were intelligent, and fully understood the meaning of the parti-coloured chart they had helped to prepare, and yet they were far more concerned with its exact position and appearance than they were with its meaning. Nevertheless, the message it conveyed was not altogether without importance for them personally.

The private solemnly screwed up the paper containing the tacks, put it in his pocket, and stuck the hammer in his belt. He looked all round the room. "S'pose the Governor will be moving office again to-morrow. It's about time, as he's been here four days now!"

"Yes; it beats me how quick they find out where it is, after all the spies we've nobbled, and the flag kept flying at the wrong place too. Of course they know who keeps the show going and who is the whole defence—in a manner of speaking. Why, it would be worth anything to them to drop a shell on the Butcher. Not but what he hasn't had some narrow squeaks already. If it wasn't for this everlasting shifting it would be worth while tidying up this place a bit—something

crool, I call it." He glanced round and snorted, his draughtsman's eye offended at the state of the room. After picking up and weighting the scattered papers, they stumped heavily from the room, chased out by the jeering cat-calls of the wind. They stumped, inasmuch as they made a great noise on the hard parquet floor; but it was more the shuffle of weak-kneed men who could not control their too heavy feet than the tramp of vigorous limbs. Both men certainly looked very ill. Their faces were haggard and grey, and their uniform sagged about their bodies.

The room itself, which had so excited the disgust of the sergeant, presented a combination of opulence and squalor that was bizarre to a degree. Large and high, its furnishing was mostly rough and its condition altogether neglected. The parquet floor was dull, except in a track to the door. The ceiling was hand-painted; even in the dim light of this winter's afternoon could be seen the inevitable cupids wallowing among garlands of roses and ribbons upon a background of clouds. The remnants of Rose-du-Barri-coloured satin, which fluttered from the edges of the panels, showed what had been the wall covering—torn down to allow of the maps being nailed on the flat. Between the panels rococo metal sconces projected, and from the centre of the ceiling hung a florid electrolier in the same style. Most of the incandescent lamps were missing, and the blackened condition of those left told a tale o

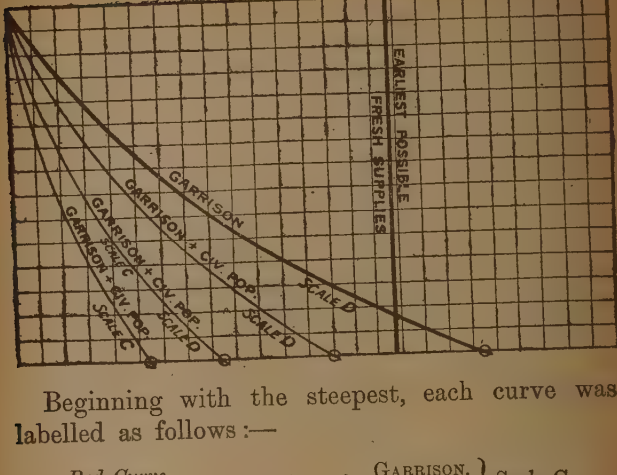
long use, while the candlesticks dotted about showed that no electric current was now available —searchlights devour so much!

Again the grey scurry on the floor: an elderly man came in. As he stamped round the room, taking off his gloves and shaking the snow from him, his eye was arrested by the new diagram. Unhooking his fur coat, he walked up and began studying it carefully. In spite of the self-congratulations of its draughtsman, it was at first sight a confusing chart, and as the Governor frowned at it, the dour expression of his square face became accentuated almost to grotesqueness.

The heading, hand-printed in bold type across the top of the paper, was—

FOOD CHART.

The sheet was ruled in horizontal and vertical lines, which formed a checkered pattern. The ends of the horizontal lines were figured as a scale of FOOD, those of the vertical as a scale of TIME. From the left-hand top corner started four thick lines of different colours, which ran downwards towards the right in sloping curves. These curves intersected the bottom of the "zero" line of the food-scale at four different points, each marked with a circle.




Beginning with the steepest, each curve was labelled as follows:—

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Red Curve* | Garrison. Civ. Pop. | Scale C. |
| *Blue Curve* | Garrison. | Scale C. |
| | Civ. Pop. | Scale D. |
| *Purple Curve* | Garrison. Civ. Pop. | Scale D. |
| *Green Curve* | Garrison. | Scale D. |

Below was this explanatory note:—

Scale C. = Minimum Scale of Rations for fighting or working.
Scale D. = Minimum Scale of Rations for bare existence.
Civ. Pop. = Civil Population (excluding those useful in defence, who are shown as "Garrison").

The Governor gazed steadily at the diagram for some minutes, tracing with his finger the different curves of the food-supply down to the point where the last ration would be eaten. He pulled a paper out of his pocket and, after a few

pencilled calculations, commenced counting along the days in the time-scale, when his Chief of Staff, a slightly younger man, entered and saluted.

"Ah, there you are! I see you have been able to get this done at last. I am glad, because I got some news to-day which I think will make the point all the clearer—so clear that even the Council must grasp it at once. I now know the date before which we cannot possibly get any food ships through the blockade. Of course, they may not come till long after—if at all,—but they cannot come before then. Just look at this, and chalk up and mark the diagram at the date." He turned to take off his fur coat and hang it over a chair.

The other took the paper, worked out a rapid sum, and marked a certain date in the horizontal time-scale of the diagram. He looked round for a coloured chalk, but seeing none, seized a quill pen from the table and, dipping the plume into the red ink, drew a line up through the date—the wet feather leaving a brilliant smear of scarlet. "Label it," said the Governor, looking round.

With pain, for he was no draughtsman, the other printed against this line, "EARLIEST POSSIBLE FRESH SUPPLIES."

The Governor joined him. They both looked at the diagram, then at each other.

"Well, sir, that settles it definitely," said the staff-officer, and he whistled softly.

It did, indeed. The value of the chart was now

increased tenfold, for it gave the absolute as well as the relative results of following the different curves. According to the Red Curve, the food would run out many weeks before the earliest possibility of relief; according to the Blue, the end would be closer to, but still before, the fateful day; while, following the Purple, it would be only a few days short. The Green was the only curve that intersected the "zero" line to the right of the scarlet smear. As the earliest date for this was not fixed, but problematical, it was obvious that the green curve was the only one that could be followed with safety, and, even then, not more than a few days' margin would be obtained. It was but too clear that only by refusing to feed the useless members of the population, or, in other words, by turning them out to freeze and starve, could the beleaguered town have a fair chance of holding out.

"I'd like a certain friend of ours to be here now and see this," continued the last speaker. It was unnecessary for him to utter any name or to specify him of the triple chin in order to be understood.

"Yes," quietly said the other, "I should like him to read his own death sentence in those curves!" There was no hint of jesting in this reply: the tone and expression of the speaker were grimness itself.

"Look here! I want some more explanation, as I prefer, if possible, to carry the Council with me, and they will want a lot. *You* know there has been

no collusion, and the chart has not been faked to back up my views. The men who made it did not know of this last message; but the result has borne out in a marvellous way what I have said all along."

"Very good, sir; I will fetch the Director of Supplies, who got the actual calculations made out."

In a few moments he returned with that officer.

"Will you please explain how these figures have been arrived at," said the Governor.

"The actual amounts of supplies, scales of rations, &c., I obtained from my returns, sir. The figures for the population I got from the Provost-Marshal. For the statistics, calculations, and forecasts, I worked in conjunction with a committee of leading business men and some of the actuaries of the insurance companies. I got these gentlemen collected specially from the earthwork and other gangs. The principal actuary of the Peace and Plenty Assurance Society presided over the calculations. A lot of it was quite beyond me."

"I see. Now, what exactly do you include under 'Civil Population'? what we discussed the other day?"

"Yes."

"In fact—the Useless Mouths?"

"Precisely. Would you like to see the figures, sir? Here they are."

The elder man put out his hand, but hesitated, and did not take the proffered bundle. Instead, he muttered half to himself—

"No, no; it is better I shouldn't. It must be decided on principle—on the diagram. I don't want to know the numbers—it might affect my decision. God knows it is hard enough to do my duty without knowing all the results in detail. No,"—he finished out aloud,—"I won't look at them! About the diagram, I don't see why the coloured lines should be curved. It seems that the decline for a uniform consumption should be a slanting line. Do you gradually decrease the ration scale?"

"No, sir, though the result is much the same. The curvature is caused by the decreasing daily consumption, owing to the increased proportion of deaths and——"

"Of course, yes; I had forgotten that for the moment. Did the civil experts collaborate cordially?"

"Very, especially the mathematicians. It was their own work they were coming back to—what they were bred up to do,—and they enjoyed it after their long spell of navvy labour. They called it a 'pretty problem.' One poor fellow went quite off his head in his professional zeal, and lost all sense of proportion. He simply revelled in the curves! He said that the thing was capable of a 'neat solution,' for if we applied a suitably arranged sliding ration-scale to the casualty curve we should never eat our last ration!"

"What on earth did he mean?"

"I don't know, sir; but I took down what he

said, as a matter of interest and as evidence against him. He said—he said—here it is—that if we did this, the zero line of food would tend to become 'asym—asymptotic' to the curves and——"

"*What?*"

"*Asymptotic* to the curves, and that if a fire at the depôt should cause a sudden drop in the food-supply, we could almost turn this drop into a 'cusp' by making a sortie next day to bring up the casualties! He was also much grieved because, as we cannot put back the clock, we can never get a 'node' in the——"

"That's enough—that's enough. What did you do with him?"

"Sent him back to pick-and-shovel work at once; thought him quite mad; but the other actuaries now state that, mathematically, he was correct, though it was of no practical value! The commercial men did not see the force of losing combatants simply to produce a 'cusp,' and said it was not business."

"Well, well, many more will go like that before we've done, I expect. Anything more I should know about the working out before the Council meets?"

"Yes, I forgot to mention that certain events are expressly excluded from this prognostication—earthquakes, large assaults, or fire in supply depôts; also, we have estimated every edible in the food total."

"Thanks. It's all only too clear," said the Governor. Then turning to his Chief of Staff, he added: "Please have draft orders got out in detail for carrying on according to the green curve, from the day after to-morrow. I have decided finally, and shall force it through the Council of Defence, now, by the aid of that diagram. Let me see the orders after the Council meeting. We meet in an hour, and until then I want to be undisturbed. Tell the A.D.C. I do not wish to see any one upon any subject not vital."

"Very good, sir."

The wind whistled, and the Governor was alone.

## III.

He pushed one of the gilt chairs covered with stained brocade up to the stove and sat heavily down. The winter's day had drawn to its close, and in the fitful light of the candles, towards which his face was turned, the deep-set eyes, square chin, and bristly moustache gave an impression of the man's nature. His face was almost brutal in its severity, though it was not on account of his appearance that he had been dubbed the Butcher. From the dark and frayed strip of silk on his breast, it was evident that he was much decorated: could the colours of the ribbons have been distinguished, it would also have been clear that he had seen much service.

Dogged to obstinacy, he was not cursed with too much imagination, and he pursued to the bitter end what he thought to be the path of duty, regardless of side-issues. Formed of tougher material than the majority of his fellow-countrymen, he played the bloody game of war with a stern logic, untouched by the opportunism and hysterical humanitarianism that was helping to sap the vitality of his country. He was therefore, popularly but quite erroneously, supposed to be careless of human life. Being matter-of-fact, he realised that success in war is as important to-day as ever it was, for defeat means economical if not physical death to the conquered. He could appreciate the meaning of that expression "*saigner à blanc*"; moreover, he knew how eminently ripe for such an operation was his own nation—grown rich and soft through years of peace and money-making. Expecting no misplaced mercy from his enemy, he never accorded it himself. To this trait and to the fact that, with a true sense of proportion, he had not hesitated upon one occasion to sacrifice a large number of his own men in order to gain more than a compensating advantage elsewhere, he owed his nickname. Given at first in execration by the hasty and ignorant, it had grown to be a name, if not of affection, at least of confidence. To the soldiers under him it was almost a term of endearment

Painfully taking off his stiffened gaiters and boots, he placed his aching feet upon the guard-rail

of the stove, took a tobacco-pouch from his pocket, and lit his pipe.

Sombre indeed were his thoughts, for never perhaps since the Middle Ages, when life was cheap, had unhappy soldier to face such a problem. It had haunted him ever since he had been driven into this coast town with his field army and had taken command of the fortress. Finding the whole population in the place without adequate food, he had foreseen what must happen. Now it had come to the point. The diagram had made matters so mathematically clear that the facts had to be faced. His own mind had long since been made up; but now the Council of Defence must see the inevitable course. It needed no highly coloured imagination to realise what the green curve meant to those evicted in such weather, and the Butcher was certainly under no delusions. It meant death from exposure and starvation to hundreds of his own race—men, women, and little ones. This was different from losing soldiers in action, or even shooting down the populace in a food riot. Not responsible for it, he as much as possible kept his thoughts from the man who had placed him in this position. His course of action determined on, he tried not to dwell on the horrors of the inevitable; but, when alone, his mind reverted to the subject. He sat on, wearied, wrestling with his dreadful thoughts, his rough features lit up in the semi-gloom by the glow from his pipe. Do what he would, he could not blot out from his sight the

starving crowd, wandering blindly in the snow between the hostile armies. As to the chance of the besiegers receiving the refugees or giving them passage, it never entered his head. He knew War, and he knew his enemy.

Suddenly, a still more dreadful possibility occurred to him. He could not get it out of his mind. Even when at length his eyes closed, his pipe went out and his head drooped forward, it continued to occupy his dreams.

He was again in one of the advanced works of the girdle of forts—where he had spent the previous night,—standing alone in the snow. Close in front was a searchlight, whose beam slowly swept to and fro across the landscape. Not far off, to one side, and well clear of the beam, was its observer. Though no snow was falling, the bitter wind now and then whirled up little clouds of it from the ground, which, as they eddied through the ray of light, flashed out like dazzling swarms of fire-flies dancing past. He was close enough to hear the "phit-phit" which ended the wild career of those flakes which chanced to encounter the metal projector, heated by the electric arc spluttering within. Between the gusts the air cleared, and he caught a glimpse over the undulating country towards the enemy's lines, a long distance off. From this stretch of country all vegetation had been cleared, but its billowy nature still provided shelter unsearched by the light, where masses might collect unseen. Close in front he

saw the inner wire-entanglement standing out black and cruel against the snow, and farther out the repetition of this pitiless web of barbed wire—a continuous grey band.

The enemy seemed to him to be inactive. A strange quiet reigned over their lines, and between the howling gusts the silence was only broken by the hiss of the carbons, the distant bark of an oil-engine, and the noise of sleeping men as they snored and muttered. Just behind the parapet lay the line of figures wrapped in blankets and skins. They were, except the look-outs, indeed asleep in spite of the continual rustling and coughing. Now and again there were snatches of incoherent babble, and even of laughter, but no notice was taken by their companions or by the few officers and non-commissioned officers pacing up and down close to him. After each gust gigantic shadows danced over the country as the collected snow was rubbed off the lenses by a gloved hand; occasionally the light was altogether cut off for a period. He stood watching. Everything seemed going well.

A bell rang under the light emplacement, and the recumbent telephone operator swore deeply as he got up with his blankets clinging to him, and placed the cold instrument to his tingling ear. It was a message from some one at the next fort, who imagined that he saw something. The ray from its light could be seen fixed steadily towards the North-West. An officer came to the instrument, and a brief conversation ensued over the wire. A

gong sounded, and with a clicking noise the needle of a dial close to the telephone jerked to a certain bearing. The searchlight above quietly swung to the desired direction, while the officer joined the observer.

The Butcher followed. There, right away among the ghostly sand-dunes, now that the converging rays of two lights were focussed on the spot, something could be distinguished in the concentrated rays. Something moving—a dark body—a mass against the snow. He could only come to one conclusion—it was the enemy advancing to an assault—madness on their part unless they succeeded in effecting a surprise. The officer looked long, then placing a whistle between his lips, blew. This signal was taken up and gently repeated on all sides. The whole place became alive, though there was no shouting, no real noise; but despite the efforts to preserve silence, the click of opening magazine cut-offs and the metallic rattle of cartridge-clips were unmistakable. The observers continued to watch.

The Butcher tried to estimate the direction and rate of advance, and after a short pause, evidently for the same purpose, the observing officer whistled again twice. The light was turned off, and the ray from the other fort also disappeared. For a few minutes the quiet bustle continued as guns were unhooded and trained, and piles of ammunition uncovered. The hot-water bags, which had been nestling against the water-jackets of the machine-

guns, were thrown aside, while two or three baby searchlights were now got ready, each in its own little emplacement. They could throw a dispersed beam for a comparatively short range over a wide area — just what was required for the coming slaughter. The long-range concentrated beam had served to pick up the quarry far away; but when it came to the "kill" the whole front would be flooded with the glare from those baby lights, the special *rôle* of which it was to dazzle the sheep and light up the shambles. The electric circuits to the mines among the entanglements were again tested, the connections made to the keys by which they would be fixed.

Here and there a man took off his glove and sucked his trigger-finger to get the numbness out, for the cold metal seared as if already hot. The great light deceptively shone forth again once or twice, and glared everywhere but in the right direction, for there was no need to impress the enemy, now marching to their doom across the snow, with the fact that they had been seen.

Silently the Butcher waited in the dark and the stabbing cold: he was pleased,—not that he gloated over the coming slaughter, but his soldier's instinct could not but be soothed by the impending success and by the way things had been done. His ideas had been carried out to the letter, and not a soul had asked either advice or orders. All had known their duty, all had done it. There had been no hesitation, no useless gun-fire at uncertain ranges:

once discovered, the enemy had been as far as possible lured on to certain destruction. When their silent masses should reach the flat space beyond the outer obstacle, the defences dark and noiseless in front of them, their hopes would rise high; but when, checked by the entanglement and struggling in a maze of barbed wire, a flood of light from those earthworks suddenly blinded and threw them into a glare of electricity——! To pursue the matter farther was too much even for *him*—and what good? These things had to be.

Whilst allowing his thoughts to run ahead, he had stood calm, but elsewhere the tension had now become extreme. Only one finger trembling overhard against a trigger and the whole plan would be given away—the victims warned. It was a moment when a man—well-meaning but of untrained nerve—might spoil the greatest *coup*.

It was strange, indeed, but no such hail of shrapnel was falling on these works as might have been expected with an assault so close. Nor was there the usual amount of firing from the enemy's lines: what there was seemed to be directed elsewhere. The hum of rifle-bullets even was absent. The enemy must indeed be mad! To assault from such a distance, and to neglect to assist this assault with gun-fire, which would force the defenders to keep under cover! Of course it was to help towards a surprise. But he wondered.

There was now a general rustling among the men. Though seeing nothing, all had an inde-

finable feeling that the moment was close, very close. He himself was infected by the contagion—his pulse quickened. Suddenly his heart almost stopped as the true reason for the absence of the enemy's fire struck him dizzy. Those silently advancing masses were not the enemy. Great God! He knew now! They were the Useless Mouths that had recently been thrust out!

He tried to shout, to warn the waiting garrison not to open fire, that it was not the enemy; but horror had dried up his voice and it rattled in his throat. He tore open his collar, shouted again. Not a soul heard or even looked up. He tried to run forward to touch them, to shake them. He could not move; his feet were frozen so hard to the ground that the effort was agony. While he struggled he heard the snick of the breech-bolts.

As he made one more frantic effort to shout, a rocket shot up in the distance, leaving a parabolic green trail across the sky. There was one loud report and a flash——!

. . . . . .

He awoke.

That he had knocked over a candle in his struggles or that his socks were scorching, he did not notice, for he was in a cold sweat, dazed and trembling.

The dreadful dream still held him. As he gazed vaguely round in the gloom he saw the diagram, and the hateful green curve — that curve which

marked out so clearly where duty lay — caught his eye and brought him back to the facts. Getting up, he looked at his watch, then stamped up and down in his socks oblivious of snow, dust, or nails. A great struggle was going on within him —a combat between conscience and sentiment. Every time he faced the chart and saw that curve, the cause of duty received an impulse. Every time he turned away the dream again possessed him and a feeling of humanity prevailed. He tried to reason, to persuade himself that his fears were groundless, that no such horror could occur, for all would be warned when the wretched souls were turned out; but he knew too well that on a dark night anything may happen. He then argued that to be shot, even by kith and kin, was after all a more speedy, a more merciful end, than to be frozen. His efforts were in vain.

He walked to the door, opened it, stopped in hesitation, and then came back to his chair, leaving the door ajar. Once again the shrilling of the wind and the fluttering of the papers on the wall filled the air. There was a tearing sound and, alas for the sergeant's handiwork, one corner of the diagram tore off its nail and hung flapping to and fro. The green curve was hidden. One influence on the side of duty was gone.

He looked at it. Though not superstitious, he muttered—"So be it!"

His mind once again made up, his expression relaxed. He rang. The Chief of Staff entered,

paper in hand, much surprised to find the Governor sitting without boots and gaiters in that icy draught.

"I have changed my mind. Have you made out the orders I told you?"

"Yes, sir; here they are."

The Governor took the paper, and, to the astonishment of his junior, tore it in small pieces.

"I now want you to make out draft orders according to the purple curve over there, and let me see them."

"But, sir, you remember what that means?" said the staff-officer. "Surely——"

"Yes; I remember. I have made up my mind not to turn them out, and to take the chance. I know what you wish to say—that the food won't last. I have thought of that—I'll risk it: we must take risks sometimes. Now I'm due to meet the Council; but my task will be easier than I thought."

He started up and would have left the room bootless as he was, had not the Chief of Staff pointed out his condition.

"By the way, please have that diagram taken down: I shall not want it any longer. If you need to refer to it for orders, destroy it afterwards."

His bewildered subordinate stood speechless. He noticed, as his Chief left the room, that the tough man appeared at last to be ageing. He walked almost feebly.

## IV.

The Dives Restaurant was well filled.

The bald-headed person with the gold glasses and the pendulous lower lip finished his peach with gusto, and beckoned to one of the polyglot waiters hovering about the special party in this hotel—one of the fashionable rendezvous of the capital. It was a man's dinner, but the private room in which the diners were seated opened out into the large restaurant, filled, in spite of bad times, by a crowd of men and women seated at small tables. The crowd was what is termed "smart," inasmuch as all were clean, richly dressed, and of outwardly unimpeachable solvency; many, too, were distinguished, or, at least, sufficiently well known for their presence to be noted next day in the society column of the papers. The large room presented a brilliant and gay scene, and the style of the whole hotel expressed that note of luxury demanded by the Sybarites of every capital of the resorts which aim at being the vogue. To the lucky mortals able to pay for its hospitality, the winds were indeed tempered, and all the senses were lulled by the atmosphere of protection and refined luxury. The carefully regulated temperature, though now perhaps a trifle oppressive after the long meal, gave no hint of the winter outside, for no draught could penetrate the revolving doors and double

windows. The eye, while pleased by the subtle colour scheme of the decorations and the bright dresses, was undazzled by any direct rays of crude light, the electric lamps being placed behind a cornice, and the rooms illumined only by diffused radiance, and by the soft glow of the table lamps in their pink silk shades. The steps of the busy waiters made no sound on the thick carpet; even the sensuous music of the string orchestra was modulated by the discreet distance at which the performers were situated. The babble in the restaurant rose in waves of sound which, however, were never so loud as to hinder the conversation in the private rooms.

A casual glance this winter night at the gay scene in the Dives or in any similar pleasure resorts of the Capital would scarcely have given the impression that war had been raging for some months, or that it had been on the whole unsuccessful. "The Front" was far away, and though many people were mourning, and more were inclined to be pessimistic, the life of the Capital continued on the surface much as it had done during peace: people were born, were married, died, business was carried on as far as the general depression permitted. The froth of the population especially still insisted on having its excitements. But the real state of the public mind could have been gauged as much from the way that any trifling success was received as from the savage and ignor-

ant criticism hurled at the army and its generals for every set-back.

The bald-headed, full-lipped man having carefully selected another peach, proceeded to peel it with that strict attention to business which had made him what he was. Conversation had flagged during this dinner, notwithstanding the flushed look on some of the faces. The one topic in the minds of all had been tacitly shunned, with the result that was to be expected from such continuous effort at repression. All round the same effect was noticeable. There was an additional reason for any lack of sparkle at this special party, for the intended guest of the evening—the Minister with the triple chin—had, at the last moment, been prevented by pressure of weighty affairs from attending. His absence was not entirely unexpected, and surmises as to its cause had been avoided until the moment of mental and physical relaxation which arrives with coffee and cigars.

"Of course it must be more bad news," said one gloomily, as he swung his chair round. "We have had nothing else for some time. If it had been good the Government would have made the most of it, and would have published it this morning. I suppose it is unavoidable, but I wish we had more details. For instance, I don't like the lack of news about the Butcher at all. The reports are much too vaguely rosy: when it comes to analysing the grounds for the official optimism, we

find precious little. I don't like it a bit. If only our guest had come, we might have got some pronouncement from him: there's a man for you!"

There was a chorus of assent and then a pause. The bald gentleman, who had just finished his second peach, deliberately dipped his plump fingers into the scented water of his finger-bowl, removed the gilded band of his cigar, cut it with the same care that he had bestowed on peach-peeling, and lovingly licked the end. When it was alight, he looked at the glowing point to make certain it was burning evenly, wiped his glasses, then spoke in a voice of husky satisfaction which proclaimed he had at last dined, and was for the time beyond the reach of fate.

"Yes—he is a man; careful, prudent, far-seeing, and square, and therefore we should have got nothing from him unless there were definite good news. But anyway, I have great faith in the Butcher: he makes War with a capital W, and does not play at it. He won't surrender."

"Why, do you know anything?" was the question snapped out from two or three directions: the speaker was the sort of magnate that gets news early.

"No, I know no more than you do—no more than is public; but I use my brains and make deductions."

"It's a crying shame that they do not give us more information," interrupted another angrily.

"Here we are, paying for this infernal war, and treated like children, getting nothing but the veriest flapdoodle served out to us. I think censorship is all right in reason; but there are limits. Do they think we can't stand bad news?"

"No," went on the man opposite, "but officialdom likes keeping the public in ignorance, for then it obtains a sense of superiority. Of course the ostensible reason of this secrecy is that the enemy should not be helped by information, which is all right as far as it goes, but my idea is that they keep things secret long after the necessity has passed. It's quite sound keeping intentions dark, but the enemy know of past events as soon as we do. No, no," he continued mysteriously, "there's more in it than that. They're hiding something—want to screen somebody—or they're rigging a bit. Take this siege; why, we know nothing of what has really happened. Every one seems content to have confidence in the Butcher! They say he's the right man in the right place, and use other catch phrases, but facts are what we want. The individual is not everything."

"There you are wrong," interposed the man with the bald head; "that's just what does count. It's the individual—the personality—that counts. I take an altogether personal view of the matter, and if any one else but the Butcher were in command, I should have sold. As it is, I am a Bull. Can I say more? He is the best man we have. As I've often said, our army is too luxurious—wants

too much—our soldiers are too soft; but not the Butcher. We need hardy men, and I think he is about the only one. Give me hardy soldiers, I say." With that he shivered slightly, and an attentive waiter at once went up and closed one of the doors.

"He is certainly the strongest man we have," added another. "If they had followed his advice all along we should have done much better, but he has been hampered as usual by the statesmen—I mean politicians. Of course I don't *know*, but I believe many of his recommendations haven't been accepted. Anyhow it's no good moping over possibilities. There may be no bad news. Why anticipate?"

"Quite!" echoed his neighbour—a fair specimen of the gilded youth of the nation, who had hitherto been chiefly noticeable for his bored look. This tired young man wore his hair long: it was dark, glossy hair, brushed straight from his sloping forehead. The receding chin and two prominent teeth seen in profile suggested a rodent; the oily hair well plastered down further suggested a rodent which had eaten its way through a keg of butter. "Why anticipate? I say," he added, well pleased with his contribution, and replaced an exaggerated cigarette-holder between his lips.

After this there was a pause, perhaps naturally, in the conversation, and the whole party listened to the wild music of the reputed Tziganes, who were again playing. It was a lament, the sad

refrain being taken up in the bass. As the last low wailing notes of the violoncello died away through the rooms the hush became general. The vibrations of the strings had awakened too many memories for conversation—faces had grown sad.

The long silence following the music was broken by a distant baying noise from the street, which grew louder and more harsh as it was repeated at rapid intervals. The current of reverie was interrupted, and there was a universal movement to give orders to the waiters, for this sound—the cry of newsvendors selling special war editions—had become familiar to all. It was impossible to distinguish what was being shouted in hoarse tones, and the papers were awaited with impatience. All pretence at indifference was cast aside.

Returning with the others, one waiter rushed into the private room with three or four papers, which were torn from his grasp. The bald man, being near the door, got the first copy. He read the scare heading—all there was—out loud, in a horror-struck wheeze—

"UNSUCCESSFUL SORTIE, GOVERNOR MORTALLY WOUNDED. STARVED FORTRESS SURRENDERS!!" Quite softly he wheezed again to himself—"Fortress surrenders!" Then, dropping his cigar, he sank into his chair and added, "And I have been buying! BUYING!"

The rooms were now filled with exclamations, shouts, even oaths; many were cursing the Butcher, few were taking his part. The band struck up

the opening bars of the latest exotic dance, but was shouted into silence, and the dejected revellers began to disperse.

The man with the bald head sat on, fingering his glass of *crême de menthe*. Again he panted, "If it had been any other I should not have backed him. Ah!—damn him, damn him! Traitor! I wonder where he failed?"

Tremulously raising his glass, he drained the warming cordial. As it flowed, a film of the sticky liqueur clung to the curve of the glass, and, catching the light, gleamed momentarily emerald.

. . . . . .

That night the Butcher lay dying in the enemy's hands—his last moments embittered by the idea that he had betrayed his country.

That night also a certain politician lay sleepless in the Capital. Perhaps he, too, may have thought——?

# The Second Degree.

"It is to be ignorant and blind in the science of commanding armies to think that a general has anything more important to do than to apply himself to learn the inclinations and character of his adversary."—POLYBIUS.

## I.

THE message ended; there was a "stop," and the sweating operator took his hand from the key. The sleeve of his shirt had slipped down over his wrist and had been balking him for some time; but so slack did he feel that he had waited to signal the final meaningless group of letters and receive the acknowledgment before stopping to push it back.

It was the last of that series of messages. He jabbed the form from which he had been reading on to the sharpened piece of telegraph wire which, already crowded with a sheaf of similar flimsies, stuck out from the table edge. These were the messages despatched and done with. On the table, weighted down by a clip of cartridges, and now much decreased, there still remained the pile which had to be sent.

The halt was welcome to the telegraphist's cramped and aching hand. The sun had gone down, yet the atmosphere was still stuffy and it pulsated with the hateful irregularity of the Morse code and its maddening dot-dot-dash, dot-dash-dot. To the tired soldier everything seemed to move to its measure; his very head throbbed in a dance of longs and shorts. The day had been sweltering, and he had been on duty for many hours of great pressure, for headquarters were shorthanded owing to sickness. He felt stale and dizzy and almost apathetic, having long been denied the stimulus of any interest in his task. He knew, of course, of the huge concentration and great movement of troops that was going on, but most of his work this day had consisted in the transmission of cipher messages, which conveyed no more to him than to the key he pressed, and the strain of accurately signalling endless streams of mere groups of letters was deadening to the intellect. He could not understand, and he did not care: he was now incapable of feeling anything except anxiety to avoid errors and a desire to reach the bottom of the now small pile of flimsies on the table. They represented, save for unexpected contingencies, the end of his particular job for that night. After them would be rest—perhaps sleep.

He yawned and stretched again, the bumping of his head against the dew-tautened wall of the tent sounding like a tap on a bass drum and disturbing the clusters of flies higher up. The canvas

was moist and pleasantly cool: he rubbed the back of his head against it, unconsciously following the jerky rhythm which in that enclosed space was all-pervading. He continued with closed eyes, his thoughts far away—perhaps of home, of wife and children, or possibly only of equally distant beer, —until a half-smoked cigarette falling from behind his ear recalled him to duty.

It was getting dark. He rose, picked up the cigarette, and from a pocket of the jacket lying on the floor, where he had placed them for shelter from the sun's rays, he drew out two candles. But, in spite of his forethought, the midday heat had been too much, and it was a sorry couple of dips that he produced. He lit them, took up the next message, and seized the key. "Click-click, click-click, click-click." The jerky, restless noise recommenced, drowning all other sounds.

The candles grew dim for want of snuffing, the flames flickered as some spluttering moth singed with horrid smell; but the man paid no heed. He was nearing his rest.

From two other tents close by, which also had wires leading to them, similar sounds were proceeding, and from one of the first-floor windows of the inn behind there issued the comparatively soothing rattle of a typewriter. Beyond, in the copse, a gentle breeze rustled. Suddenly the night air was split—"Brrrp-Brrp-Brrrrp"—by a loud ripping sound. Startling in its clear-cut intensity, it continued in monstrous parody of the same cadence

tapped out so daintily, if irritatingly, by the key in the tent.

Was there no escape from the cursed code?

These gashes of sound without reticence were from the spark of the Wireless as it sent its waves cleaving their way through the night to many miles' distance — the noise of their departure a vague measure of their impetus. Though purposely placed at some distance from the house, the installation was scarcely far enough away for the comfort of any of its occupants, certainly not far enough for the exasperated staff trying to work.

Presently the noise in the telegraphist's tent stopped, and the light inside ceased to glow through the canvas. The man came out of the tent, and curling himself up in a blanket, lay down in the opening with his head outside, to get the benefit of the mere breath of air—scarcely more than a sigh in the tree-tops.

His bad time was done, for, as far as he was concerned, the great concentration was over. Without even a curse at the grinding rattle of the Wireless, he turned over and fell dead asleep, the cigarette still behind his ear.

## II

Not fifty yards from where the telegraphist lay sleeping, another man was experiencing a feeling of relief far deeper than anything felt by that tired

soldier. This was the Field-Marshal Commanding-in-Chief, now sitting in the porch of the little inn —his present headquarters, as was shown by the three red lamps in front. He was a middle-sized, thick-set man; but beyond this and the expression of utter abandonment of body and mind conveyed by his attitude, it was too dark to distinguish much of his personal appearance. As he sat alone in the gloom, the slow and regular glow of his cigar-end showed that the smoker was very much at ease. After a few moments he rose from his chair to ring a hand-bell on the table, and the slight stiffness, or rather a lack of elasticity in his movements, suggested that he was well over middle age, possibly a trifle old for the strenuous life demanded by field service. A young staff-officer came out.

"Yes, sir."

"Have you got the 'move complete' reports in from the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Divisions yet?"

"The Fifteenth is in, but not the Sixteenth."

"When do you expect that?"

"In about two hours, if there is no hitch."

"What's the time now?"

"Nine-thirty, sir."

"Well, tell the chief staff-officer, please, that I wish to see him. No—don't disturb him now; tell him that I should like the 'future' map completed up to time, to be in my room at midnight. The Chief of Staff returns to-night, and I wish to show it to him."

The young officer turned to go, too well-trained to show any surprise; but he had shared the common belief that the Chief of Staff had died in hospital a week ago.

"Stop. If any fresh move reports of importance should come in while I have the map, let me know."

"Very good, sir."

Again alone, the Field-Marshal went on smoking. How fit he felt! He had but recently shaved and tubbed, and that delicious feeling of comfort, which a more or less precarious attainment of such luxuries makes so grateful, pervaded his being; his chin was smooth and smelt of soap. How well his cigar drew! Yet during the last few days he had tried smoke after smoke from the same box, only to throw them away in disgust. His dinner also had been quite good, and now the breeze, faint as it was, felt most refreshing after the long hot day. In fact, all things seemed to have entered into a conspiracy to please, and all was going well.

In some ways the Commander was as direct as his bull neck implied, and as simple as he was direct. But, with the defects of his qualities, he sadly lacked *finesse* and imagination, and consequently did not at all realise that the taste of the inferior dinner, the aroma of his usual cigar, even the caress of the feeble breeze,—the whole rosy outlook at this moment, — were the outward physical signs of a mental and moral reaction. He had just come through a very bad time, and though it would be

hardly correct to say that he felt like the master of a vessel entering port after a stormy voyage, for he was by no means near port, yet the fog had lifted, he could take his bearings, and knew where port lay.

The responsibilities of supreme command, and the imminence of a great battle—he was commanding an army in the presence of the enemy—usually had no terrors for his stolid mind; but on this occasion there had been the element of entire novelty in the situation, and in facing it he had been deprived of his chief source of inspiration.

He was placed in the position which, of all others, had most terrors for him—that of inactively awaiting the action of others. Against his will, against his principles, and against the whole bias of his mind, he had been forced to act on the defensive. Up till now he had always been able to assume the offensive. The contrary *rôle*, with its loss of initiative, its mystery and its suspense, was consequently all the more dreadful. Though, by all the canons of the military art, his present force was too weak for the attack, it was fairly strong in defence; quite enough so, could only the point of the enemy's intended assault be discovered in time for the delivery of a crushing counter-stroke. But it was not strong enough for an onslaught in an unforeseen direction to be resisted. To retain equal strength in every part was to court certain defeat: to keep a large central reserve ready to be moved to any threatened spot was out

of the question: the only course was to mass beforehand where the attack would fall.

This needed no imagination: it was obvious, and without hesitation the Commander had decided upon the third course, for it appealed to his instincts, besides being correct in principle. His mind was set upon crushing the enemy, and this gave the only chance. If he could only discover where the enemy were going to press,—he was not able to offer a bait, or indeed any inducement towards any special spot,—he could spin his web in the right corner, nurse the attack, lead it on until it was well within the meshes of his web, and then —even his appetite for the offensive might be glutted. But where to spin the web?

To the north lay the enemy, about to advance. The position which the Field-Marshal held extended for some fifty miles from east to west. Naturally strong, it had been further strengthened during the period of occupation by every resource of fortification. The west, owing to its topographical features, was absolutely secure: elsewhere, except in two places, the position was safe enough. The only danger-spots were in the centre and on the east, but they were only dangerous in the event of the unforeseen advance of the enemy. So far this was all absolutely plain, but unluckily there was, in a tactical sense, absolutely no difference between these two points. There was no intrinsic reason why the centre should be attacked more than the east, or *vice versâ*, and therefore

no hint for guidance, no basis for a scheme of defence.

For some days now the Commander-in-Chief and his staff had been at the old game of collecting intelligence—official reports, spies' reports, rumours—and endeavouring to sift out the improbable from the impossible, the possible from the improbable, and the probable from the possible, in order to obtain some foundation on which to build. This was nothing new; but what was novel and disquieting was that, having formed a basis of probabilities and erected thereupon an edifice of future action, he could not proceed or force the pace—he still had to await the lead. From day to day the burden of information varied. Now it pointed to the centre being threatened, now it veered round and gave the impression that the east was the crucial spot.

The Field-Marshal was a capable man and a strong man, but, as his movements showed, he was getting old. Veteran though he was, his brain, always more solid than subtle or brilliant, was not now what it had been. Of a virile and masterful nature, he had won success and the confidence of his nation by systematically following up one definite line where smaller men might have hesitated between alternatives: whatever course he followed he followed with his might. In political language, he was a "whole-hogger." So far, all the courses he had adopted had proved well chosen. In past years his had been the responsibility for

execution, his would have been the responsibility for failure, and his, consequently, had been the reward for success. But his had not always been the mind which had conceived the plan adopted. As often happens, the Thinker—the master mind—had not been the recognised leader. The man who had for long inspired the Field-Marshal was possessed of far more subtlety and imagination than the stolid, dogged individual now smoking in the hotel porch. This man was the general—his Chief of Staff—who had now been absent three weeks, wounded.

Friends for years, the two had together achieved success in other campaigns—success which, though placed entirely to the credit of the senior, was almost entirely in conception and partly in execution due to the junior, than whom there could not have been a more loyal subordinate. Now that he had been absent during this time of perplexity, the senior realised how much he had owed to the other's brain,—how much he had relied upon him. He was not of an ungenerous nature, but this fact had never before been so driven home. The other had hitherto never been absent.

Within the last four days the signs had crystallised, and all pointed in one direction. Nearly every report corroborated the fact that there was a great massing of hostile troops just opposite the centre: it seemed an established fact. There were also other reports that hinted at a probable concentration of the foe on the east, farther away

from the front, and therefore not so easy to locate. This news had now received so much confirmation that the Commander had decided it to be true, and had made up his plan of action accordingly. Once he had settled what to accept as fact, it had not taken him long to make his deductions, for he knew the general against whom he was fighting. Indeed it was his estimate of his opponent's character that had almost entirely guided his calculations. In spite of his natural preference for the concrete as opposed to the abstract, and of his repugnance to the metaphysical, he had learnt to attach value to the personal factor. Psychology was a hobby, almost a mania, with the absent Chief of Staff, and so great was his personal magnetism that the senior had to a certain extent become saturated with his subordinate's theory. Moreover, he had nothing else to go upon.

The enemy's great force in front must be a feint. No one but a fool would show strength where the real effort was to be made. His opponent was no fool—he knew him to be a hard-headed, straightforward, sound fighter. Yes—the threat in the centre was not to be feared,—the danger lay in the vague, impalpable force hovering opposite his right, on the east.

Having worked this out to his satisfaction, all his energy and all the efforts of his staff had, during the last two days, been devoted to the dispositions necessary in order to meet—to annihilate—this main attack of the foe. The redis-

tribution had been going on for two days and was now almost complete. Not only had he discovered his opponent's intentions, but he had almost woven his web in the proper corner: next morning would see it complete to the last thread. True, he was deeply committed by his dispositions, for he could not now have met a sudden assault on his centre, in spite of superior communications and interior lines; but he was so certain of his premises that this did not worry him. The great suspense was over. He had made up his mind, all measures had been taken, as far as was humanly possible, and last, but not least, his trusty lieutenant, the Chief of Staff, was returning to duty this evening: would soon be beside him to confer and to confirm. Yes—it could not be disguised —to confirm.

The cigar did indeed smoke well. So satisfied was the smoker, and withal so comfortably weary, that, like the telegraph operator, he too might have fallen asleep had not the faint hoot of a motor horn aroused him. The horn again sounded, closer: he heard the whirr of a motor rapidly approaching, and the road was lit in the glare of acetylene as a large car drew up suddenly. Out of it stepped a tall man in goggles, wearing a military greatcoat perfectly white with dust. It was the Chief of Staff.

. . . . . .

Half an hour later the two were still sitting in the room.

"First-class, sir; I quite see. Couldn't be more clear. We know our opponent, I think, and the east is certainly where he'll attack. Moves going all right?"

"Yes; the whole should be in position to-morrow morning. We've nothing to do here now, the last of my orders went out this evening. I have been actually loafing."

"Splendid, splendid," said the other almost gushingly, at last recollecting to take off the goggles, which he had merely pushed up upon entering. As he did so the extreme plainness of the face was revealed. A diagonal purple streak across the angle of the forehead did not improve its appearance.

"I'm quite fit again and up to any amount of work—dying for it." As he spoke and moved in a nervous, jerky way, his face worked. He was an ugly man.

"Glad to hear it, but there is nothing—absolutely nothing—to do at present. Everything is nearly ready."

"Almost *archiprêt*, in fact?" said the Chief of Staff.

But the other did not quite follow: he was not very quick. He said "Eh?"

"Ready, sir, quite ready?"

"Yes, I said so. In half an hour we shall have a 'future' map in here, and you can see the final position of the troops. In the meantime have a wash and get some food; I'll run through these

despatches." He looked at his assistant almost sentimentally—"It's good to see you again. That obituary notice startled me a bit, though."

"Oh, that? Yes, it may sound conceited, but I had that put in myself, on the off-chance of its getting round to *them*. It won't do much harm if the old man opposite"—he waved his hand vaguely round the room—"thinks that I am—gone. Eh?"

The Field-Marshal really chuckled. He was literally purring with content. His conception had been indirectly and tactfully, but none the less actually, approved: for the execution he needed no approval.

Both were smiling,—the Commander because his scheme had been accepted by his subordinate, the subordinate because he was sympathetic and liked his Chief, and because he had insight and knew why the old man was smiling.

There was a step at the door, and a senior officer of the General Staff entered quickly. "You must see this at once, sir," he said to the Field-Marshal, as he handed him a paper.

The business must have been very pressing, for the last-comer was too perturbed to be startled by the resurrection of the defunct Chief of Staff now looking at him so pleasantly across the table.

The Commander-in-Chief read the message deliberately, then re-read it. When he handed the slip of paper to the Chief of Staff all the complacency had faded from his face.

There was no deliberation about the latter's perusal. When he returned the paper he too had ceased to smile.

## III.

The two were again alone, the Field-Marshal glum and silent, the Chief of Staff striding up and down the room, and whistling under his breath in that dreary way which may betoken consternation, astonishment, but not joy.

The little paper which had so upset them did not bear a long message. On the top was the despatch from headquarters at home typed out in cipher. The message was not from anywhere in the theatre of war—it had come all the way from the capital, presumably originating in the enemy's. Underneath was the transcription. The purport of it was that the commander against whom they were fighting had been dead for two days, and had been succeeded by a junior—practically unknown—officer, whose name was given. The wire concluded: "This is absolutely authentic. We know nothing of new man."

For some minutes neither spoke, for both felt the blow: the one more keenly from a naturally more personal point of view, because of all his efforts and scheming of the last few days; the other, untouched by such considerations, could look at the matter in better perspective. Never-

theless, he seemed now far the more excited of the two.

The blow was too cruel for even the Field-Marshal to bear quite unmoved—it was absolute upheaval. The mind he had gauged, whose workings he thought he knew so well, had for two days ceased to exist! For more than forty-eight hours he had been pitting himself against a fresh brain, a strange will—an unknown quantity! His plans might be good or they might be worth nothing, for nothing did he know of the new personality. In his Intelligence Bureau were pigeon-holes for all the likely seniors on the other side, and in them *dossiers* full of information. For this unknown man there was not only no *dossier*—there was not even a pigeon-hole! Such an appointment seemed unthinkable, and yet the wire was explicit—fatally so—and the information beyond doubt correct. It was a facer; his mind was blank. Two things only did he at once realise, that this news probably nullified all his efforts, and that he was hopelessly at sea again, more so than ever. He sat there sullen. As is the case with some stolid natures, a reverse only made him sulky and obstinate. The expression on his face was now almost mulish.

The other, with the more resilient mind, was the first to speak.

"What was this man's name, sir?"

"What does that matter? We don't know him." The tone of irritation betrayed age.

"I think I know something."

"Very well, read it again yourself," grunted the senior, almost throwing the slip over to him. "I am not sure I know how to pronounce his outlandish name."

The General snatched up the paper, re-read it greedily, and then muttered: "There is one letter more, but it must be the same." Turning, he continued: "Have you ever met him, sir?"

"Yes, I believe I have. I once met a man in their Service with a name very like that, but it was ages ago—when I was attaché in——"

"By——! Have you? What was he like?" broke in the General in a shout, excitement conquering his manners.

"Good Heavens, man, what are you shouting for? What do his looks matter? I never knew him."

"I apologise, sir; I'm afraid I was rather excited," responded the other, suddenly calm as his Chief became the reverse, "but I do believe he is a man I once knew, and I want to fix it."

The Field-Marshal's childishness died away: he knew the other's worth.

"Well, well, if that's it. Let me see—it was so long ago, I only recollect the general impression he gave was unpleasing. Oh yes—I remember now, he had red hair—bushy red hair."

"Yes?" in a suppressed voice.

"Do you want more?"

The other nodded.

"He had, I think, a sort of foxy look—long pointed nose."

"Yes?"

"I can tell no more. He was an inferior sort of fellow. I did not know him well, and didn't want to."

The Chief of Staff now seemed suddenly and unaccountably pleased with himself. "That is enough: three corroborative details would fix it sufficiently for a bookmaker: it is a certainty. That's my man! Can you spare half an hour, sir? I mean, can you wait half an hour before taking any steps, and let things run on as they are?" His eye twinkled, he knew the answer before it came.

"Wait half an hour? Wait half a year! We don't know what to do now, and I don't see how we shall know in twenty half-hours!"

"Yes, I hope we shall, sir. Give me half an hour with a smoke in the porch and I'll give you that man's nature, and we shall know which way he is going to jump—centre or east. Eh?"

"Very well," was the querulous assent. "I only hope you succeed. A nice mess this personal equation business has landed us in now!" But the General had disappeared.

Half an hour is not much time in which to recall the events of nearly forty years ago.

## IV.

The Chief of Staff sat deep in thought, trying to recall a now far-distant epoch of his past life—his schoolboy days. Slowly it came back to him, bit by bit, each reminiscence of the old life drawing another in its train. He recollected the house, the masters, and many of those utterly unimportant details which cling to the memory—the shape of the cracks in the dormitory ceiling at which he used to stare on the late Sunday mornings, the hot stuffy smell of the schoolroom on a summer afternoon, even the taste of the pale and watered ink with which he used to cover his fingers. He recalled many of his schoolfellows, amongst them one rather older than himself—a foreigner. There were a good many foreigners at that school. Partly owing to his nationality, but more to his disposition, this boy was heartily disliked. He was called the "Ferret." Yes, yes, he now well remembered the Ferret—his thick crop of stiff red hair, his pale face, pale eyes, and, above all, his pointed nose, with a dividing line down its tip, which was always pink and quivering like a young rat's. Yes, he remembered him. What a curious beast he was: a bit of a sportsman too in his own way, but it was not the way of others. Reserved, untruthful, and conceited—a disconcerting element and a perpetual mystery to the boys as well as to the masters. There were other sneaks, other liars,

other queer youths at the school, which was mixed enough, but their characters were transparent in comparison with the Ferret's. His chief peculiarity was that though he sometimes lied, he often told the truth. It was also his success, for no one knew which way to take him, and he always attained his object when he wished to deceive.

The General had arrived so far step by step, but it was not enough. There was something more he wished to recall, some special incident which would give the complete clue to his schoolfellow's character. Strive as he would, and though he felt it at the back of his mind, he could not entice this special reminiscence from its cell in his brain. It was exasperating. As he fidgeted he felt for the first time the attacks of the midges hovering about his head: he lit a cigar in self-defence, in the hope also that perhaps it might soothe his nerves and make his memory work.

But no. He could not recall this thing. He looked at his watch. Time was going, and here he was within an ace of the clue to the situation, the key to victory and perhaps to the fate of a nation for generations.

Always excitable and impatient, he now made no effort to keep calm even in the hope of beguiling his memory. The wound in his head began to throb Swearing softly, he got up from his chair, strode out across the road and started to walk into the little plantation on the other side, but had not gone ten paces before his head struck the branch

of a tree with a force that made him reel. He stopped muttering, and heard some heavy object fall into the long grass at his feet. He was dizzy, and without any reason stooped and picked up the thing. It was an unripe apple. Absently placing it to his nose, he sniffed.

Like a flash the scent took him back across the space of years—back, back to the dusty class-room. It was afternoon, and the room smelt strong of apples.

He stood petrified, apple to nostril, eyes closed, for now he was getting near it. Yes, the school-room reeked of apple; there were apple-cores lying all about and numerous boys munching. One—the Ferret—approached him and jeeringly offered him a core; he could remember the nasty expression—the twitching nose. Now he had it!

As he stood there in the dark in that orchard the smell of the apple projected a series of pictures upon his mental retina as clear as those of a cinematograph, and now they came in logical, chronological sequence.

He well remembered that autumn afternoon when his boyish heart had been torn between two desires—either to go to a certain orchard to get the last of some special apples, or else to pay a visit to an old lady who gave teas that were celebrated. He could not do both things. He wanted the tea; but of the whole school he and the Ferret alone knew of this special apple-tree, and he dared not pay the visit in case the other should clear off the

fruit. If the Ferret would wait, he could have his good tea; if not, it would have to be postponed. He met the Ferret and asked him point-blank if he was going for the fruit. He could recall the very words of the puzzling answer, given with a disconcerting smile—

"Of course I am, youngster. Yes, get every one of them, and sell what I can't eat. What d'you think?"

This was so obviously chaff that he went off to pay the visit and eat his tea with a light heart.

The old dame was not at home. He got no tea, and returned cold, tired, and hungry—to be offered a gnawed apple-core in the schoolroom. He could see the cores now lying about the room and almost feel the hail of shiny pips with which he was bombarded.

His subsequent onslaught on the Ferret had only resulted in his own discomfiture. But the explanation?

Ah, yes! It was when he got his hamper. He had been very keen to learn the Ferret's system of misleading people better by truth than by lies, and had finally extracted a promise of revelation in exchange for a cake, a cake on top of which the almonds simply jostled, and a two-bladed pocket-knife with a shiny black handle. Having taken payment in kind beforehand and eaten one-half of the price, the Ferret had one night—the last night but one of the term—come and sat on the edge of his bed and told him his Theory of Scoring, as he

called it. How unpleasant his pale face had looked in the moonlight, all checkered by the shadows of the bars of the diamond-paned window, and how glibly he had talked as he ran his hands through his fiery hair.

He did not mind giving his theory away, he had said, for it was his last term. To *get on* it was necessary to be ahead of every one else, to anticipate what they would think or would do, to know their natures, and he added a good deal more stuff which then appeared to be sheer nonsense. He concluded by saying that lying—good lying—was useful in moderation, and his last words were: "To a stranger I never lie till I am forced—then I lie well; the other man thinks I am telling the truth—and is misled. That's the First Degree of Cunning. Next time I wish to deceive that man, I tell the truth. He, of course, thinks that I am lying, and so is again misled—the Second Degree. If I wish to——" But his listener had had enough of the Ferret's rubbish and cut him short. How angry he had been, for he did not understand this rigmarole, and thought it nonsense! How he had vainly demanded his knife back — the cake was eaten,—and how he had received another thrashing in his endeavour to get it! It all came back now so clearly.

The Ferret had departed next day but one, and he had never seen him again or heard of him since; but the way in which he had been, as he considered, cheated out of his knife had

long rankled. It was not for some years afterwards that he had seen any sense in his philosophy.

That was the Ferret with his "First and Second Degree." If this man now against them were the Ferret, and there could be no doubt of it, his nature would at bottom, at the crises of life, be the same. Given the occasion, he would act in the same way. The General looked at his watch, for he was going to take his full time in considering the matter, relit his cigar, and paced up and down the dusty road, again running the Ferret's philosophy over in his mind to make absolutely certain. As he did this the humour of the situation gradually struck him—the incongruity between the immense issues at stake and the things he was trying to recall appeared ghastly, then ludicrous. He smiled. His appreciation of the gravity of affairs and his vindictive feelings were struggling against his strong sense of humour. It was only after some effort that he calmed himself sufficiently to go in and see his Chief. The task before him of explaining this thing to his unimaginative senior was sufficiently hard without prejudicing himself in the other's eyes by any misplaced levity.

Throwing away his cigar, he went towards the house with a firm step, and as he crossed the beams of the headquarter lanterns it was not a pleasant face that flashed out three times crimson against the darkness.

In his hand was the apple.

## V.

It was past midnight, and the Field-Marshal was sadly studying the fully flagged map now hung up on the wall of his private room.

From a short distance the sheet of paper gave a very good pictorial representation of what the positions of the two forces would be next day. One might have supposed that a pattern had been traced on it in some sweet and sticky substance upon which large coloured flies had settled and stuck. Running about due east and west in a curve with its convexity northwards, were two lines of these flies, blue and yellow, facing each other. In the yellow were two conspicuous clusters or knots, one right up on the line towards the centre, and the other towards the eastern end and some way back from the front. These were the enemy's concentrations: that on the centre, ascertained and visible — the sham attack; the other, conjectured only — the real attack. The blue flies were slightly crowded at each end of the line where it curled back, and, to meet the real attack, there was a dense cloud on the east retired from the front. The position of this concentration was such that, should the opposite crowd of yellows press forward and penetrate the blue line, they would in their turn be fallen upon and overwhelmed.

This gaudy picture was the result of deep cal-

culation and immense work on the part of its artists—the General Staff at headquarters, and of superhuman efforts on the part of the troops—the blue flies.

The old man gazed steadily at it. Though its colour scheme was perhaps a trifle crude, yet till a short half-hour ago its composition and values had seemed so excellent—and now, possibly all this labour had been in vain, or even worse than in vain.

A quick step outside and the Chief of Staff entered with an impetuosity strange in a tired and convalescent man at this time of night.

"Well?"

"Now, sir, I can tell you something definite. I said I knew him of the red hair. I have now placed him exactly, and can give you the *man*."

"What's the use? Tell me what he's going to do, not what he is like."

"Quite so. I will give you the boy, his nature, and the way his mind worked. This will give us his personal equation; from that——"

"Yes, I see; but I am afraid, my dear fellow, you are still as madly keen as ever on the 'personal equation.' I am a bit shaken in my belief. But go on, please."

The two sat down facing each other across the table, a candle on either hand, while the General as clearly and as briefly as possible and without details laid bare to his Chief the Ferret's soul—as he estimated it.

During his bald statement he laboured under the effort of intense restraint, for however natural the different steps by which his memory worked had appeared to him when trying to recall his school-days, they did not well lend themselves to words. Now he was talking to another man —an especially stolid man—the contrast between his boyish escapades—apples, pocket-knives, and cakes—and the supreme gravity of the present situation struck him with increased force. It was all he could do to keep from laughing, for his self-control, through the present and past tension on his nerves, was no longer what it had been. He already saw something more than interested wonder in the eyes of his matter-of-fact Chief, and this look warned him off any picturesque details. With an effort he at last logically worked up to his end, and finished almost calmly—

"That was the boy, sir, and that must be a good deal of the man!"

There was silence for a few moments.

"Yes, knowledge like that has been used in war, certainly——"

"Since the days of Hannibal, at the very least."

"I have also heard something of that theory of cunning before," mused the senior.

"Probably. One Bacon once wrote on the subject. That's what made me think that there was more in it than I had first imagined, and that perhaps after all I had not let that knife go so chea——"

He stopped with a jerk and a suppressed snigger which made him cough.

"Knife? What knife?"

"Nothing, sir; that's quite another matter, which does not at all concern the question," was the hasty reply. Fortunately the Field-Marshal had no petty curiosity, and did not press the point; but he eyed his friend keenly before he continued—

"Now, are we quite sure that this man is the Ferret—your Ferret?"

"It must be—same name, same red hair, same foxy nose. These corroborative facts—independent details—make a mathematical certainty. In fact, all works out so pat that it smacks of the strawberry-mark and the long-lost br-r-r-other of the play!"

"Yes, so I was thinking."

"However, that does not vitiate facts. You have seen the man yourself—indeed *you* gave me the details, so they have not been imagined by a visionary faddist to fit in with some preconceived theory."

"Yes, the appearance is certainly correct. I knew the man well by sight."

"And I knew the boy by sight, and all through."

"Well, well. It may be—it may be. Anyway, we have nothing else." He sighed. "Supposing this is the Ferret, and that he is unchanged—to come to actualities—what then? It means, of course, that—that——"

The quicker nature here broke in,—"That as he has not fought against you before, and as you do not know him, he will deceive you in the simplest way; in other words, he will use the First Degree. For two days now he has carried on his predecessor's dispositions and is visibly, nay blatantly, massing against our centre,—" he waved his hand in an excited gesture at the map; as he did so his senior noticed, to his bewilderment, that he was clutching a green apple, "—therefore he will not attack there. He will attack our right!!!"

The Field-Marshal pondered. This was going quick with a vengeance, and his mind worked more slowly than that of his friend. As he thought over it, half carried away by the other's personality and fervour, his eyes were fixed on the apple.

"M' yes, so it appears to work out. But how about you? Won't he know you are here—you, his old schoolfellow?"

"You forget that I am *dead!* That idea of mine may be our trump-card."

"Yes, I forgot that. It turns out luckily though, for our present arrangements stand good, and we can carry on as we are doing. It is more than lucky, it is providential; I doubt if we should now have time to alter. I don't see how we can do better than work on your theory —wild though it seems. Right or wrong, we must choose a course and follow it through unreservedly.

We may be wrong, which will mean failure, if not defeat; but if we simply wait, equally strong all along the line, for a further sign of the enemy's intentions, we are *certain* of failure." He paused. "Yes, I'll do it. We will carry on as we are against a real attack on our right." He sighed again—more from relief than from anything else.

"It's the obvious course, I think, sir."

"We can do no more at present—everything is in train. Thank God it works out this way! Of course it pans out as I thought all along, but that despatch certainly did upset me for a bit: I was like a ship without a compass." His tone had again become cheerful, almost smug, for he had something tangible to fight against, and having again come to a conclusion he again ceased to fear. He continued: "But it certainly does seem far-fetched. The tactical scheme of an army based on what a schoolboy once said many years ago!" He chuckled.

The other did not reply; the older man's last remarks reawakened his sense of the ludicrous, so far successfully repressed; he could not speak. He felt his self-control slipping away.

The Field-Marshal, still chuckling, carefully chose a cigar from his case, and drew from his pocket a knife—a two-bladed knife with a black horn handle, just like—— This was too much. The General began to giggle.

"Eh?" said the other without looking up.

"Hee-hee-hee," was the reply.

The Field-Marshal gazed in surprise at his friend, in surprise mingled with misgiving, for this giggling, coupled to the reasonless clutch on an unripe apple, seemed to denote some lack of balance—perhaps his wound?

"Ha-ha-ha"—and like an upheaval of nature the reaction took place. The General roared. He lay back in his chair and roared louder. He walked up and down the room, holding the apple at arm's-length, and shrieked in idiotic tones—

"A pocket-knife! A *two-bladed* pocket-knife, apples, and a cake?"

The Field-Marshal dropped his cigar and stood up. His first feeling was one of extreme anger, for it certainly looked as if his old friend was presuming on their mutual affection in order to play the fool at a most inopportune moment; but he had never known him to be a practical joker. A second glance showed him that there was no fooling here, and his look changed to one of sympathy for his subordinate. Men often get unstrung on active service, and he was not surprised at this case, for before being wounded the strain on the Chief of Staff had been terrible, and for such a highly-strung man to start work again so soon after recovery was most unwise: those quick nervous men will always wear themselves to bits. The shrieks of the hysterical General were now ringing through the night, and one or two officers came running in to ascertain the cause of the uproar. Laying the panting man on the floor,

they tore open his collar and threw water over him, and he recovered as quickly as he had collapsed. As he began a string of fervent but unnecessary apologies—for a nervous breakdown is common enough—the other officers quietly withdrew.

The two sat on for some minutes, while the Chief of Staff collected himself. The Field-Marshal's qualms as to the other's sanity had now vanished, and he cordially assented when the General got up, saying—

"If you have done with me, sir, I think I will try and snatch some sleep."

"Yes, certainly," and he added as the other reached the door, "get a sleep while you can: you may have no chance to-morrow. Dream of how we shall defeat the Ferret—lying brute!"

Something in the tone of the last words made the hearer stop. From the phlegmatic Field-Marshal, even though he were worked up, they seemed unusually spiteful.

He turned his head. "Why do *you* call him a lying brute, sir?"

"Good Lord, man, haven't you been spending the best part of half an hour trying to convince me of his lying character?"

"Yes, certainly. *I* know him to be a lying brute, but you do not. You spoke bitterly, as if you had some personal reason for calling him that. Have you?"

"Why, yes, I have. All this talk about the

fellow has reminded me of a good deal that I had forgotten. The man did lie to me badly once when I was attaché—about something or other, I don't——"

The other whipped round. "Has lied to you?"

"Yes, yes, I tell you. He——" but the Field-Marshal did not finish, for the General, glaring fiercely, stalked slowly up to the table and hit it such a blow with his clenched fist that a candle jumped out of its socket and fell over still burning. He then thrust his face across the table to within a few inches of his astonished senior's, and said in the crescendo whisper of forced calm—

"Do—you—know—sir—what—that—*means?*"

The elder man's fears for his friend's reason returned in tenfold force. Certainly, as he stood there in the gloom leaning across the table, his face covered with a slime composed of dust and water, and his clenched fist — still holding the apple—in a pool of rapidly congealing candle-grease, he looked almost dangerous.

The Field-Marshal held on to his chair. He was momentarily at a loss. The other answered his own question.

"That was his first bout with you!"

"Oh! Now I see what you are driving at; but he will never remember."

"Won't he? *He* remembers everything, and will think you do, too."

"Then——?"

"He will play his Second Degree—and—will—attack—the—CENTRE!"

"Ah!"

. . . . . .

There was no more sleep for the tired telegraphist or for any one else at headquarters that night. War is a Juggernaut that recks not of the weariness of individuals, and it was high noon next day before the click of the typewriters, the tap of telegraph keys, and the smack of the Wireless had abated. By that time, too, many of the pretty blue flies on the map might have been seen in the sunlight to have danced round to a fresh pattern—nearer the centre of the picture

## VI.

Three mornings later. In response to the clamour of the guns the weather has broken. Though the rain has tailed off into drizzle, the ground is still sopping and the bushes drip sadly as the damp breeze shakes them.

Behind the wayside railway station in the centre of the valley, rises a semicircle of purple hills, and above and beyond them again heavy clouds are hanging. A thread of blue smoke, bullied by the rain, quivers up from the station buildings, and the sodden flag hanging limp from its staff close by gives an occasional sad flap as a puff of air galvanises it into momentary life. Though sodden with rain, its

colours can be recognised as those of the Field-Marshal's headquarters, now moved on far from the village inn. A cavalcade winds slowly over the hills to the left, and approaches. As they come nearer it can be seen that nearly all the bedraggled men composing it are officers, though not all their horses are officers' mounts. They must indeed have been scratched together anyhow. Some are troop horses, others are most palpably "hairies" which have long known the drag of gun or waggon, but all are alike in their weary dejection as they stumble over rocks and slither down the slippery clay of the hillside. In spite of their evident fatigue and discomfort an air of smothered satisfaction sits on the faces of all but a few of the party. The dejected ones are riding in the centre, and as far as the universal coating of mud allows of comparison they appear to be wearing a different uniform. At their head rides a slight man, hatless, and as he turns his head his bushy crop of red hair presents the only spot of colour in the sombre picture. Though his eyes are cast down and the whole of his sharp-featured face is expressive of hopeless perplexity, yet he supplies also the only touch of briskness, for in spite of the damp his moustache retains its stiff upward curl. This man is the captured commander of the defeated army, who, with a few survivors from his staff, is on his way to surrender to his vanquisher.

As the cavalcade approaches the flagstaff the challenging neigh of a horse suddenly rings out

from behind the house, and the air is filled with the shrill noise of the chorus in reply. Ears are pricked, nostrils quiver, bits jingle, and as regards horseflesh the appearance of the dismal party is transformed. A small knot of mounted men appears from behind the house. It is the Field-Marshal coming out to accept the surrender of his foe. A few moments and the parties halt as the leaders alone ride forward. Courteously they salute in silence, and then as the vanquished commander faces his victor, perplexity is still stronger on his face than any other emotion. Then his glance passes the Field-Marshal and falls upon a tall man with a scarred face riding behind. It turns to a stare. A gleam of recognition, of comprehension—almost of relief—comes slowly into his tired eyes.

He recognises his real conqueror!

# The Kite.

"Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire."—(Ecclesiastes.)

## I.

THREE dirty and breathless soldiers scrambled painfully through a gap in the hedge on the brow of the rounded slope of the hill and, taking out their maps and field-glasses, lay down prone on their stomachs. So dirty were they that it was hard to realise that they were officers. Placing both elbows squarely on the ground, to counteract the unsteadiness of hand caused by their heaving bodies, their thumbs were soon busily twisting the focussing-screws as they directed their glasses on to a large patch of scrub away below, some three miles to the west. On a rise in this rough country a long line of intermittent flashes could be seen with the naked eye.

The hedge stretched for some distance along the brow of the hill. About one hundred yards behind, and parallel to it, between hazel hedges, ran a country road. This—hardly more than a lane—was, to the south of this point, sunken, but just

here was flush with the ground. On the near side of it, immediately behind where the officers were lying, was an open gate, and close to this gate a young poplar-tree, against which was propped a motor-bicycle. In the lane itself were a motor cyclist and a couple of orderlies, the latter dismounted and holding the horses of the party. Down below, in the direction in which the three were gazing, stretched a peaceful panorama of undulating country, fading into bluish heat-haze in the distance. The different crops gave a many-hued appearance to the landscape, the richer colour of the uncut hay alternating with the still crude green of the young grain and the reddish purple of the beetroot fields. The few fleecy clouds floating lazily in the sky here and there cast vague shadows, which slowly moved over hill and dale. The white walls and shining roofs of the homesteads dotted about stood out gleaming in the sunlight, and these, with the patches of woodland, caught the eye and assisted in some estimation of distance, otherwise impossible upon the variegated background with its network of hedges.

It was an almost perfect day in early June. Yet, in spite of the brilliant sunshine, there was an oppressive sultriness in the air which gave more than a hint of a coming storm.

Far off, in the same positions they had occupied all day, hung three war-balloons, motionless in the still air. They were of a curious shape, and as the sun glistened on their distended skins they had

the appearance of three monstrous and bloated yellow caterpillars. Upon the youngest of the three men under the hedge they had a disquieting effect of oppression. He felt that they were the eyes of the enemy—as indeed they were—and was uneasy under their silent gaze; at times he even imagined that those menacing eyes could read not only his actions, but his very thoughts and desires.

Though the elements seemed at peace, there was clear evidence that man was not, for here and there could be seen the angry glow of a conflagration with its pall of black smoke. In places the dirty-white dust-clouds betrayed the movement of masses, though the masses were not visible, while over certain spots thick clusters of smoke-puffs, suddenly breaking out like signal flags from the halliards of a ship, showed where shrapnel shell were raining down destruction. These puffs were of different colours—the majority pure white, but others were of a purple and magenta hue as violent as aniline dyes. An occasional bright flash, followed by a dull detonation and an upshooting trefoil of black smoke, marked the fall of high-explosive shell. From the clamour that filled the air, one might have imagined that the whole country-side formed one large shipyard or boiler-maker's shop, so metallic was the sound of musketry close at hand. Every moment this body of sound was stabbed by the nearer rifle-shots which rang out separately, and broken by the occasional throb of machine-guns, the mechanical beat of pom-poms,

and the booming of artillery. But to an ear used to the noise of battles, there was one fresh sound —that of the quick-firing field-guns; for as they seized some fleeting occasion to pour out their squalls of shell, individual shots could not be distinguished in the continuous roar.

Notwithstanding this din in the air, it was difficult to see any signs of life. Of the work of man there was ample evidence; but of man himself—save those on the hill—there was no trace. Had a curious observer, however, walked some way down the bellying slope of the hill, he would have seen the backs of a long line of infantry digging for dear life near the bottom.

From all this turmoil down below, the little group at the top of the hill seemed strangely detached. No shell flew screeching over their heads, no bullet sang near them—they gazed on undisturbed. At last one put down his glasses and sat up with a grunt.

"We've been looking at the wrong place all along. We've been watching their flashes and bluff trenches on that rise. The guns are using flameless powder, and are a good deal closer—more to the left of the rough. I can just make them out, but cannot see how many there are."

"I can't see anything except the flashes which appear just where the trenches are," replied a second.

"Yes, of course, that's their game! D'you see that red and white farm?"

"Yes."

"Above that there's some water."

"Yes."

"Above that, still more to the left, on that hump covered with——"

"Yes, yes, I have them now; I should say there were more than one battery. They don't seem to be entrenched either; but it is hard to tell on that background."

"There are more like twenty guns there," continued the first. "You may be certain they're entrenched,—they're no fools. They have shown the dummies and hidden the real emplacements, which would not require much work on such a place as that—an ideal spot for guns."

"And so is this," added the third, the youngest of the three. "If it were not for their balloons, we could get a whole brigade up here unseen all the way, and suddenly open fire from behind this hedge. Even if they are entrenched, we could enfilade them and give them a bad time—enough to keep them quiet. If they're not, Lord help them, once we start!" He chuckled softly, and muttered fervently to himself, "Yes, Lord help them!" He was a Gunner.

He stared for a minute at the nearest balloon, silently and in deep thought, then taking off his hat, began absently to mop his head. Suddenly he stopped quite still, his head turned to one side as if listening.

"My God! it *is* rising!"

The two gazed at him in blank amaze, and, startled, at once seized their repeating-pistols.

"The wind, I mean—the wind. I feel it on my damp head!"

They still looked blank.

"Don't you see? If the wind only rises, down go those cursed balloons, and then——" There was no need to finish the sentence. The others jumped to their feet; one sucked his finger and held it up; the other picked a puff-ball and threw it in the air; all watched it gently wafted up the hill.

"Yes, look over there; that's more than haze—it's cloud!"

Towards the west there was now a low bank of grey cloud stretched across the horizon, against which the intermittent flashes showed bright.

"Whistle up the cyclist!" snapped out the eldest of the three, sitting down with note-book and pencil.

As the cyclist came up, he said, "Take this as quick as possible to the General of the 10th Division: he must be found; but if on the way you get near the officer commanding the Corps Artillery, show it to him and say I want him to read it."

After a minute they heard, as they got up, the snort of the motor breasting a rise on their left, and after three minutes there was nothing but the reek of petrol to show that any one had been on that hill-top.

They had gone and no one had noticed two

small scoops in the ground—one under the hedge and the other farther along near the road—where ranging shell had fallen.

II.

The wind has risen with the coming storm, and, above, the white clouds begin to chase each other across the blue sky. Out in the open and on the hill-tops the trees are stricken by gusts of wind which rob the hawthorns of the last of their bloom. In the sheltered valleys there is peace and quiet, and under the lee of the hill the sultriness of the whole morning seems to have been concentrated.

The artillery brigade has now been waiting some time in that hollow lane between the high banks covered with wild-flowers. Long enough to breathe the panting gun-teams, and for some of the gunners to dismount and pluck dog-roses, which they have stuck in their hats.

The still air in this little heat-trap, heavy with the smell of horses and the overpowering scent of May-blossom strewn on the ground, combined with the drowsy buzzing of the bumble-bees—the gentle murmur of a hot summer's day—has a somnolent effect on all except the animals, as they stand there zigzagged across the lane, the guns and limbers slewed to ease the strain. They present a succession of shiny quivering skins, and tails switching in a vain endeavour to drive off the

hovering swarms of flies who divided their attention between the backs of the men and the horses. Though there is no conversation, for the men—here and there chewing a biscuit or taking a sparing drink from their water-bottles—are all tired, yet there is a general air of pleasurable expectancy, for the nature of their present errand is now known to all. It is their first experience of active service, and the event now awaited is to be their baptism of fire. In the minds of the more serious, a slight though vague feeling of apprehension—running like the coloured thread through the lay of a rope—adds zest to their suppressed excitement, for many and wonderful have been the yarns going the round of the barrack-rooms as to the powers of the enemy's quick-firing artillery. Here a more phlegmatic man has lit his pipe and wastefully thrown the match away, to burn to the end among the nettles on the bank—a thing which alone is sufficient to show that these are the early days of operations.

How the sun's rays pour down between the trees! How mercilessly they betray, even through the cloud of dust still hanging in the air, a hint of the more unpleasant side of war! The weary and lathered horses, the red and strained faces of the men, their peeled noses, the little runnels made in the grime on their cheeks by the perspiration as it streamed down, the purple sweat-patches in the greenish-yellow uniform. Now and again, as if maliciously to accentuate the contrast between its

dainty self and the crowd of men and animals sweating below, a pale butterfly flits aimlessly in and out of the shadows—sometimes nearly, but never quite, settling on a horse or gun.

The windings of the lane only permit a view of some hundred yards of its length at one time; but even this short distance offers an impressive sight. It is apparent, in spite of the dust and dirt, that the greater number of these men—some still on their horses, some standing, and some stretched out on the shady side of the road—are seasoned and in the prime of life; no mere boys, but men in the best sense of the word, sturdy and full-set. Even for gunners they are a fine lot; and during this lull preceding the coming storm, the sight of this little collection of splendid men and horses raises thoughts as to whether any other army in the world can produce their equal. Both men and animals are the last word in continuous training and scientific preparation applied to picked material. Not only are they good to look upon, but good to act. From the showy prettiness of a tournament driving competition to the serious business of getting on to the target, they excel; for here at this moment is collected the smartest brigade of field-artillery in the army—and that means, as they think, the smartest brigade in the world: they are armed also with the best guns in the world. There stand the guns one after another slewed across the narrow road, almost blocking it with their length. Wicked they look

in their dusty greenish paint, with an occasional glint of steel where it has been scraped off. Even to the uninitiated these quick-firers have a more venomous appearance than the simple old guns; for, with their long, low-hung bodies peering mysteriously from behind their shields, they look like monstrous grasshoppers crouching on the hill. Ugly and venomous-looking, they are the pride of their owners. Though he may not talk much about it, never has there been a true gunner who did not love his weapon and thrill with the idea of using it.

To those, now a little thoughtful on account of the legends concerning the enemy's wonderful quick-firing artillery, the sight of their own, whose powers they have so often tested on the practice-ground, is reassuring. They have the best gun ever invented, and at speed of ranging and accuracy of fire they are unequalled. What more? Are they not going to catch the enemy unawares? And to be caught unawares by a squall of shrapnel from modern quick-firers means extinction.

To the officers, the exact nature of the present task is known, and the possibilities of the occasion better appreciated,—for though as yet without personal experience in war, they know to what a pitch all the nations have brought their quick-firing artillery, and what is expected from its "*rafales*," "*tir rapide*," "*schnell feuer*,"—call it what you will,—upon an exposed and unsuspecting enemy. They are standing alongside the

horses, one feeling his animal's legs, another loosening a girth, but the majority cheerfully talking in little groups.

At last the dreary wait is over, a flag flickers from one hill to the other. "The enemy's balloons are down." With a sigh of relief the order is passed, and the brigade moves on, slowly at first, then breaking into a trot, for its destination is still some way off, and time, tide, and the chances for quick-firing artillery wait for no man.

The message has come down from the youngest of the three officers who were making the reconnaissance under the hedge two hours ago. For the past hour he has been watching those malignant balloons from that same spot, and whistling for the wind. As the wind has risen, so have his spirits. It is a difficult thing to gauge the height of an object in the air, and several times he has thought that the balloon nearest the enemy's guns seems lower than it was, only to find out he is wrong.

The cloud-bank to the west grows larger, and as its ragged edge creeps up over the blue sky, the dark background shows up the glistening balloons the more brilliantly. The two farthest off are coming down—there is no doubt about it,—and at last the nearer one seems lower. Yes—it is! Down, down it sinks. When it is quite close to the ground he waves to a signaller behind the road, who passes on the message, and so back it goes to the waiting brigade.

He crawls behind the hedge for a moment to watch the range-takers, who have been up here for the past half-hour and have taken and checked and re-checked the distance to the enemy's guns. Some men with tools also, who have uprooted the gate-posts, and widened some openings from the lane on to the hill-top, are now cutting little windows through the hedge on the brow. A few officers arrive ahead of the batteries, and to these he points out their positions and the target and range.

All is ready, and the head of the column is even now jangling up the hill.

## III.

The same landscape as watched by the three under the hedge, but viewed from the other side. In the foreground, half hidden among the patches of gorse on a gentle slope, is a long irregular line of perhaps twenty guns. It is difficult even at this short distance to count their number, for they are dotted about here and there amongst the clumps of cover. Though of a greyer hue, they have a strong family resemblance to those others resting in the little lane on the hillside. By each is a water-bucket, the purpose of which is shown by the damp earth round the gun, and the absence of dust. Alongside also are little shelter-pits dug for the gun detachments, the bright yellow of the

freshly turned earth artfully concealed with pieces of bush. The guns, the limbers, and the very horses themselves—over there in the rear—are embowered in greenery. The incongruous Jack-in-the-Green appearance thus given to these engines of destruction seems at first ill-timed foolery. It strikes a jarring note, as does laughter in the presence of death. Overhead, to one side of the line of guns, a huge yellow balloon sways in the rising wind and strains at the cable which slants away down to a small collection of waggons in a convenient hollow.

To the general din of battle all round is periodically added the roar of some of the guns in the line as a target worthy of a "*rafale*" of shell is found. The paroxysms of noise indulged in at intervals by these quick-firers are the only sign they give of their action, for they neither belch out flame nor kick up dust. Each fresh outburst seems to call up an echo from the direction of some absurdly ill-concealed earthworks about half a mile to the rear. The enemy are shooting badly. Few shells fall near the guns, though many pass over with a shriek to burst in the neighbourhood of those conspicuous earthworks, whose parapet must be a very shell trap, so continuous are the explosions on it. An occasional heavy shell rumbles up from the south, and, passing over with the noise of an electric tram, detonates in a fountain of yellow earth near the same target.

Near the focus of these explosions are a number

of men sitting at the bottom of deep holes, and from their occupation it appears that not all the explosions so close to them are caused by hostile shell. They are busily employed in setting off flash bombs just outside their yellow parapet whenever their own artillery fires. And as two more shrapnel from different directions whistle high above the much decorated guns, and burst over the pits, it is clear that the latter are the targets aimed at.

This is the method in the madness of these troglodytes in their pits and of the other stage effects.

Some little way from his guns is a dried-up saturnine sort of man, dirty and anything but smart—the commander of the artillery. He is talking to a staff officer, with occasional pauses as he stoops to gaze through a telescope mounted on a tripod, not to the south-east in which direction his guns are firing, but towards the hills to the east. Close by sits another officer at a field telephone in a hole in the ground; such work is at the present moment too important for an orderly. From the instrument a cable, sagging from one bush to another in loops, leads towards the waggons near the balloon anchorage: this cable is the nerve leading from the eye up aloft to the nerve centre below. A few soldiers are sitting about. Not only do these men wear a different uniform from those other gunners now perspiring on that hillside, but they are unmistakably of a different race.

The Commander again takes a long look towards the hills where something seems to excite his apprehension, for he converses earnestly with the staff officer, and the two look more than once towards a poplar-tree the top half of which is visible above that hill on the east. The wind increases.

The distant balloons are already gradually descending, and a message shortly comes down from the observer above that it is too windy to remain up. The word is given, and slowly the great mass is hauled down to the depression near the waggons, where it is practically hidden, its approach to the ground being the occasion of special attentions from the enemy. Here, like Gulliver among the Lilliputians, it is seized by many hands and bound. Hardly has it nestled, with much heaving of billowy sides, into its hollow, when the eye is attracted by something dancing up and down among the brushwood close to it. It is an oblong framework, partially covered with dirty grey canvas, which has commenced to make sundry abortive little swoops up into the air ending in abrupt dives down again to earth. Finally this weird kite—for kite it is—makes up its mind and sails steadily upwards to the tune of its whining cable-drum. Up, up it goes, holding well in the strong breeze till it becomes a mere speck in the sky. Another kite follows, then another, and again one more, threaded on the same cable, till with the combined pull it is stretched as taut as a

piano wire, and hums in the breeze like the weather mainstay of a racing yacht.

The Commander walks over to the starting-point of the kites, where, sitting near an exaggerated clothes-basket, is a young officer. He is unshaven, his face is pale and drawn, and he appears worn out as he sips slowly from the cup of his flask, but as his senior approaches, he rises, salutes, and listens attentively to his somewhat lengthy instructions. He is an exceptionally slight man, and his general air of fatigue is explained by the fact that he has been observing from the balloon for the past three hours: the dark rings under his eyes show where the constant strain has most told. In spite of this he is again to go up in the kite, not because there is none other capable, but because the advantage of having up aloft a pair of eyes that already know the lie of the country is at the present juncture of greater importance than the fatigue of any man.

As the Commander concludes his harangue, a shell bursts on the ground close to him, covering him with sand. He does not pause to shake the sand off, but finishes his sentence—"Of course it is a chance, but they *may* not notice you go up against this cloudy background, and may be tempted to take up that position by seeing the balloon go down. If they do, well——," and he looks towards his guns and smiles thoughtfully.

The younger man nods, takes one more pull at his flask, feels if both pairs of field-glasses are hanging round his neck—he carries two—straps

a telephone receiver and mouthpiece round his head, and climbs into the clothes-basket which is held by the men. The basket is attached to the rigid kite cable by runners. After the gear is tried, another large kite, which is harnessed to his prosaic-looking chariot, is thrown into the air. Making one or two ineffectual dives, it catches the wind and begins to pull. Slowly at first the observer rises, then faster as the great wings above him catch more of the breeze. Now they feel it, and up he sails like a pantomime storm-fiend, to the accompanying moan of the wire vibrating in the wind. In a few moments he is a stationary spot far up on the slanting wire.

How insignificant in contrast to the great bulk of the balloon does the whole collection of kites appear,—yet—the eye is there.

## IV.

The commanding officer goes back to his station by the telephone, and waits. Prrrrrt, grumbles the instrument, and this time it is he himself who takes the receiver. He listens attentively, for it is difficult to hear along an aerial line, and there is much repetition before he finally replies "All right!" to his subordinate up above. A word to a staff officer, who at once waves to some one near the guns. Then ensues much activity. Within three minutes every muzzle has been switched

round by hand so as to face the hills on the east, at half a right angle from its former direction. The gun-layers at once start laying at the range obtained by those few shots fired some hours back, and buckets are emptied on the ground, but no effort is made to dig shelters, for they will be unnecessary. The exposure of and loss to be caused by the new position is ignored. When all are at their stations ready to open fire, a whistle sounds.

The suppressed excitement is catching. That the Commander himself is not unaffected is shown from the manner in which he ostentatiously, and with almost too great deliberation, selects a cigar from his case and begins chewing the end of it. . . .

"Prrrrrt," rattles the telephone: the Commander drops the chewed cigar and listens.

"Are you ready?" gurgles down the wire.

"Yes."

"The head of their column is not far off the poplar-tree."

A pause. . . .

* * * * * *

Meanwhile, on the hill-top, the watcher ha again sat down. Now there is nothing to watc in the sky, he sets himself to study the enemy guns, amongst which he seems vaguely to discove some movement. Can they have suspected any thing? As he sweeps his glass carelessly across th grey cloud towards its terrestrial object, somethin

—a midge probably—in the upper corner of the object-glass catches his eye. He puts down the glass and rubs the lens with his handkerchief. He looks again. The midge is still there. He looks directly at it—it is a collection of midges. Good God! These are no midges—they are a covey of war kites high up in the sky! Yes, and there is the observer hanging some distance below, who must have seen all!

By this time two or three guns have turned out of the lane and are unlimbering.

He rises and tries to shout—it is too late.

* * * * * *

"Now they're turning out of the road, through three or four gaps, to come into action—now two guns have left the road—hullo!—are you there?" continues the thin metallic voice down the wire.

"Yes."

"Let them have it."

The Commander, from his lowly position, looks up and nods to a signaller standing up on a mound; the latter drops his flag.

The air is split by the noise of the whole line of guns as they open rapid fire. It is like the report of one piece prolonged into a continuous long note.

Upon the brow of that hill of doom, hiding the sky-line for perhaps 400 yards to the right of the now obscured poplar, appears a crown of magenta-coloured smoke, out of which a succession of light flashes sparkle.

* * * * * *

By those up on that hill is heard a faint roar in the distance, followed by a whistling sound, and the air above — all round — is full of crackling reports, shouts, oaths, and groans. Bullets tear the earth on all sides, and the steel gun-shields ring out like gongs under their blows. Everything except the dreadful sounds becomes blurred in the puffs of acrid, tinted smoke which the wind drives across the hill-top.

* * * * * *

In a minute, automatically, the fire ceases—a long period for quick-firing guns which pour out fifteen shells a minute, and much ammunition, but this is an opportunity given by the gods.

The Commander puts the telephone to his lips—

"Hullo!—is that enough?"

"Wait a minute. My God! It is."

## V.

Not one return shot has been fired.

The smoke is dissipated by the wind as soon as the squall of shell ceases, and the scene of the butchery stands revealed.

Behind the hedge are three guns unharmed except for splintered wood. Their green tint is all mottled with oval patches of shining silver plated by the metal of the glancing bullets. Men are lying about singly, nearly all wounded in the head, and nearly all dead. A few who still crouch

paralysed behind the shields seem unhurt. Horses lie tied together by their harness in kicking, screaming bunches. At the gateway is a tangle of capsized gun, limber, man and beast, which entirely blocks that part of the lane.

This is an *abattoir* better undescribed in detail —a medley of dead and dying men and animals, and of vehicles jammed into a solid mass. At intervals guns lie upturned or wedged across. The mass still struggles and heaves. Here and there drivers have half-succeeded in driving their guns up the bank, in a gallant attempt to get out of the shambles, with the result that the horses lie dead on the top, and the guns lie overturned in the hollow. A few unharmed and dazed officers and men still shout orders and shove and push at the guns. There, where an ammunition waggon, hit direct by a shell, has exploded, is a cleared space. Branches and twigs are splintered in all directions, and the shrapnel balls have stripped the leaves from the trees and scattered a sparse shower of green over their handiwork.

Though at least one of the shells has not burst exactly, for on its back, under the hedge on the brow of the hill, lies the headless body of the young gunner officer—the glasses still in his left hand, a handkerchief in the right—yet, as the small voice had squeaked down the telephone wire 5000 yards away,—it *is* enough!

# One Night.

## I.

"'Elp me! O 'elp me, Ikonas!' This way the . . . M.I.!"
—Rudyard Kipling.

There was another gust of wind and the suspended pots and pans rattled while the wires of the entanglement creaked dismally against the posts. No. 4 sentry—Private Angus M'Murdo—standing in the two inches of water collected in his trench, shivered again. On this foul night many thousands of men and animals were shivering out in the open as the wind and rain swept over the bleak plateau of the late Oranje Vrij Staat—that State which, with splendid irony, possessed a tree for its crest.

The sentry was one of a picquet in the outpost line of the little township of Donkerstad, O.R.C. The period was during the height of the "Christian era," before the blockhouse age and after the famous guerilla leader had made his series of attacks on the communications of the British army, when the name of De Wet was a bugbear to all detached posts on

or off the "L. of C." In reality almost ubiquitous, to some imaginations he was all-pervading.

The rain having increased with the wind, the hissing sound of the drops in the grass had grown louder: it seemed now to melt away into infinity, across miles and miles of open veldt. For any one on the look-out, this impalpable noise was bewildering: it was like a sound fog; but far worse to any one who was attempting to listen for the approach of mounted men was the monotonous tattoo which had again commenced somewhere in the entanglement. Hanging conveniently under a barb, which served as a gargoyle for the collected raindrops on the wire, was an empty lobster tin. "Tup-tup-tup-tup-tup . . ."

M'Murdo swore. It was dark as the inside of a cow; there was no sky-line; the only sense upon which he could depend was that of hearing. The rain and the creaking of the wire were bad enough, but this infernal dripping was . . .! By this time, after much intent staring and listening, his eyes and ears felt strained and were inclined to play him false. He was no jumpy young soldier, but he was now a fit subject for the efforts of a Christian Scientist. Had another man said that "De-e Wet with ten thousand "Boojers" lay there in front of him in the black of the night, he would almost have believed it. Had his own officer told him so, he would really have seen them. Several times his ears betrayed him and caused his imagination to weave a walk, a canter, a gallop into the song

the drops, and it was not till his temples throbbed from the holding of his breath that the regularity of the sound reassured him. That empty tin caused at least as much suffering to one human being as ever its brilliant-hued contents had done. At last M'Murdo did hear something breaking the regularity of the dripping—there was now a duet. Far away on the veldt track to his left front he heard a new and similar, but less metallic, measure—"Tititup-tititup-tititup . . ." There was no mistake about this.

Standing at the "ready," head just above ground-level, peering into the darkness, he sang out in a voice rendered strange by nervousness—

"Halt! Who goes ther-r-e?"

He was a sour man, not given to verbosity. Hearing no reply, he leant forward against the sodden earth of the parapet and pressed trigger in the direction of the sounds. The report of the rifle rang out with all the exaggeration of noise borrowed from the silence of the night: the flash showed nothing to the sentry's eye; but the glistening drops chasing each other down the sloping wires winked at him like the eyes of so many lizards.

The breech-bolt rasped harshly as it was viciously opened and closed. Again a report rang out: again the gritty bolt rattled back and home. Cheek against stock, finger on trigger, M'Murdo paused.

"Friend! friend, you damned fool!" came back in an angry and nervous voice. "Allermachte!"

The canny sentry remained steady at the present —elbows and chest against the parapet.

"Stand, fr-r-iend! Hands up! Advance one and give the counter-r-sign!"

The steps sounded closer.

"Halt, mon, or I'll shoot. I can see you!" He saw nothing; but this palpable lie is apt on such occasions to carry momentary conviction to a guilty conscience.

"Don't shoot! I am alone. I don't know the countersign. I am from the convoy—eh!"

By this time the remainder of the picquet, some eight men, had turned out from their wet but comparatively warm corrugated-iron lairs, and arriving in the flooded trench with a flop and splash, had groped their way to the parapet and joined the sentry. There were repetitions of that unpleasantly murderous noise—the opening and closing of the bolt of a rifle. Far worse than the report is this sound. The one is simple and a sign that action is momentarily over: the other—a threat and an anticipation—keeps the nerves on the stretch. The stranger repeated: "Don't shoot! I'm British!"

The sergeant had now taken command, and after whispering a caution—"Keep down, men, ready to fire," he shouted, "Who are you?"

"Mounted orderly from Captain Limas's convoy. I have a message. He is attacked."

"Oh, he is, is he? I haven't heard of any bloom ing convoys. Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"Where are you?" That was a slip, and the sergeant felt it. It would weaken the coming fiction.

"Here," but the rattle of the entanglement conveyed far more exact information than the word.

"Go along to your right."

"This way?"

"Yes, that's it. Now," continued the unabashed non-com., with the time-honoured falsehood, "we can see you quite plain. I have fifty men here covering you, and if you try a rush, or to get away, or any of your pals come up, you know what to expect."

"I tell you I am alone."

"I dare say. Round this way. Hands up, mind."

After a few more directions the gate in the entanglement was opened and in stumbled a man leading a horse.

By this time the subaltern in charge of the support had come upon the scene with reinforcements, and the prisoner was led to the tents of the supporting post. A very few words with the subaltern and his hash was nearly settled,—he gave his name as Trooper Theron, and in his excitement let drop some words in the *Taal*. When the officer's lantern was produced his fate was quite settled, for notwithstanding that he wore the uniform and all the badges of the Oudtshoorn

Mounted Fighting Scouts, the long upper lip and soft fringe of fluff on chin were damning.

While the visitor was being searched and deprived of arms, his rapidly achieved unpopularity with the men became clear. There were whispers of "Boojer," "Spy," "Yes, we've heard that before."

The officer was polite, non-committal, but obdurate, and after he had with difficulty scrawled a brief report on a sheet of paper ruled in squares at so many inches to the mile, the protesting trooper was blindfolded and led away to the office of the Commandant of the Township of Donkerstad, Orange River Colony,—in other words, the *Wachtzaal* of the little, dirty, one-horse railway station. Upon this comparatively safe but unpleasant journey we will for the present leave him.

Not far from where Trooper Theron had been led through the outpost line, a heaving mass of blanket, with much sulphurous language issuing therefrom, was the outward and audible sign of the presence of Lieutenant the Honourable Aubrey Fitten, in command of a detached company of the 103rd Battalion of Mounted Infantry.

This young and usually zealous officer was not in the best of humours. He had been out with his small commando of one company the whole day long, looking for an enemy who never appeared; he felt cold and wretched, and had lost his smasher hat. Through the great kindness of the officers of the half-battalion lying close by, of whose tarpaulin

mess he was an honorary member, he had shared their execrable meal; but the only comforting feature of an altogether wet dinner had been the warmth of the coffee. Upon crossing the little *sluit*,[1] now running half full, between the mess and his own bivouac, he had slipped and almost fallen into the water, and after he had got up, all that remained of his "lantern — camp, folding, iron, galvanised," to give it the correct title — was a nougat of glass, tin, candle-grease, and mud. Having stumbled round his horse-lines and sentries, he had found his own little home, consisting of two blankets supported on sticks, and had crawled in. Whilst struggling with his valise he had unfortunately kicked over one prop of the woollen roof, which had flopped damply on to his head.

The result was that, as Trooper Theron was stumbling forward, led by the hand of one soldier and hastened by the proximity of the naked bayonet of another—for the thoughtful private had kindly informed the blindfolded man of its position,—Fitten was peevishly engaged in a hand-to-mouth struggle with a very wet blanket. He had at last found the necessary bit of stick, succeeded in propping his roof off his person, and was just dozing off when, through blanket and through coat collar, he heard that call which at once arrests the attention of any commanding officer or man in charge on active service—a sentry's challenge. It betokens an arrival. An arrival, if not hostile, usually means

[1] Stream.

a message. Twenty to one a message at night means urgent orders. One hundred to one urgent orders mean that the recipient must at once get up and go somewhere and do something, and bang goes a "night in bed."

"'Alt! 'Oo goes there?"

"Friend. Commandant's orderly."

"Pass Commandant's orderly: orl's well. Wot's up, cockie?"

"Is this the M.I.?"

"Yes. 'Oo do you want?"

"Commanding orficer."

Fitten groaned, though he knew well that only he could be wanted by an orderly. He felt what was coming. So did the sentry, who had never been told that inquisitiveness was impertinent.

"Same old game? Op saddle and trek?"

"Yes, that's the size of it."

"You'll find the orficer commandin's blanket over there to the right on its lonesome. He's in 'is fleabag all right. I 'eard 'im get in myself. 'Is 'at should be on a stick alongside, so you can't miss him."

Fitten groaned again. A message from the Commandant at such an hour meant no invitation to a hot supper, and his feet were only just beginning to feel themselves. Turning on his elbow, he tried to get his head out to direct the orderly, whose heavy steps he now heard squelching in the wet grass. He again knocked over a pillar of his roof.

Guided now by the voice and the nature of the language used, the orderly, who was a very old soldier, gravely saluted the heaving mass at his feet: "The Commandant's compliments an' he wishes to see you at once an' will you please give orders for the M.I. to saddle up an' follow you round to the office sir?"

A muffled voice replied: "Tell the Commandant with my compliments that I'll be with him in a few minutes. Send the orderly sergeant to me as you go back."

"Very good, sir."

The night was yet young, and though silence had for some time reigned over the little bivouac, but few men were sound asleep. There was now a subdued buzz amongst the blankets.

It was the work of but two long minutes for Fitten to find and lace up his wet boots, while he jerked out instructions to the sergeant. At last, slapping his haversack to feel if it contained all that it should, and seizing his carbine, he walked off in the direction of the red light, which was at once the "home signal" of the little railway station and the "office" signal of the Commandant. Now that he was up, he felt more sanguine of the chance of real business.

Standing hitched to the railings of the station enclosure he saw a tired horse, and on the platform, glistening in the feeble light of a few oil-lamps, three men were standing. In angles and corners under the small roof were numerous huddled figures

in blankets and greatcoats. Against the sheen of the wet stone slabs the three figures stood out clear. Quick of eye, Fitten at once recognised in one the tall Commandant: another he quickly spotted by the shape of, or rather want of shape of, his legs, for an infantry soldier,—no one but Thomas Atkins can wear putties wound so that ankles appear thicker than calves, and elephantiasis suggests itself to every observant medical. The third puzzled him. The man was clad in a British warm coat and wore gaiters. His legs were slender, much as an officer's, and yet the attitude was not that of an officer. There was something raffish about it, a touch of the swashbuckler, albeit a tempered touch. However, Fitten was not to remain long in doubt. He joined the group and saluted.

"Good evening, Fitten. Are your men coming along?"

"Yes, sir; they'll be here inside ten minutes."

"Ready for——?" He smiled. To complete the sentence was as unnecessary as the query, for the subaltern and his M.I. were now veterans and required no nursing. They would not turn up at a night summons without arms, ammunition, or food.

"Yes, at once, sir."

"Good. What I want you for is this. This man here," he indicated the swashbuckler, "has escaped from a convoy which has been held up—possibly captured by now. Eleven miles away, you said, I think?"

"Oh, ja——, yes, sir."

The Honble. Aubrey eyed the speaker. For the same reasons as the other subaltern away out on the outpost line, he instinctively distrusted him.

"He is unshaken in his story and quite positive, though I can't get much information or detail out of him. He is certain that the enemy is in force——"

"Yes, very many burghers, Commandant," interrupted this bearer of good news.

"Just come in here a minute," continued the Commandant to Fitten, leading the way into his office,—also the Telegraph Office and Intelligence Bureau,—where a pallid officer in a greatcoat was struggling with numerous telegrams at an ink-stained table. The Commandant turned to him—

"What do you think of it, Thicknesse? Have you any news of a loose commando prowling round?"

"None, sir," was the reply as the speaker wearily licked his thumb and flipped through the bundle of forms.

"What are the De Wet 'finals'?"

"I have him located to-day at Winburg, Ladybrand, Boshof, Ventersburg——"

"Oh, then this is very likely he at last." Turning to Fitten, he continued: "Well, there it is. I believe this man. He is hustled; but these Afrikander fellows are pretty shrewd, and don't get panicky for nothing. You must take your

company out. If the convoy are still keeping their end up, chip in and try and take the enemy in the rear or flank; I will send out a company of infantry to reinforce you. If the convoy is scuppered, follow hard, get into touch and make them fight. Hang on to them, and, whatever happens, prevent them from getting away with the waggons. Shoot animals—do anything. If we have lost the convoy, they, at any rate, shall not keep it. These supplies would be a Godsend to them. To-morrow I will get some mounted reinforcements to you somehow. Do you understand—you're to get out and stick to the waggons at all costs."

"Yes, sir," with hesitation.

"What's the matter? Surely you're not——?"

"Yes, I am, sir."

The senior stared.

"You see, sir, I don't like the cut of that man's jib. I—I think it is a plant. What is his corps?"

"The Oudtshoorn Fighting Mounted — no, Mounted Fighting Scouts."

"I don't believe it: never heard of 'em. It is a put-up job."

"I don't think so."

"I think this is a burgher in a khaki suit sent in with a cock-and-bull yarn to get our mounted force out into an ambush."

"No. I thought of that at once; but a convoy *should* be near here now, passing up. I don't think that that is the case."

"If not, it is very likely an effort to get part of

the small garrison away on a wild-goose chase and then attack the place."

"That I think is much less likely than the other. We only have a small garrison, but are pretty strong. No, I think it is quite genuine. However, I'll talk to him again."

The speaker left the room and spent some time in cross-examination of the messenger, who, perfectly understanding the reason of these questions, rather lost his head.

"May I die, sir, if I do not speak the truth!"

The Colonel commanding was more impressed by this pious wish than was the subaltern, who had followed him.

"He's all right. He could not have answered all that if he weren't straight. He'll guide you. You have no time to waste. You know what to do; shove along, and don't be too nervous. Good-bye! Good luck!"

There was no more to be said. Fitten saluted, and went out into the darkness with the guide in front of him.

The party was waiting dismounted outside the station. Their O.C. gave them five minutes, nominally to get things ready, actually in order to make up his own mind. Though he was by now used to night alarms and excursions, this special job was a poser and required some consideration. He was not going to start out "bald-headed" into the night without thinking over all possible contingencies and making up his plan of campaign

beforehand. For him the days of rushing ahead first and thinking afterwards were over. He had been in the "incident" with his late captain, when the latter had been killed, and he now preferred to see his way. One matter he could settle out of hand was to arrange for the guide. He sent for the bugler, who was mounted, and made the Afrikander mount also.

"See this man, Bugler Bragges? He is our guide."

"Yes, sir."

"Tie his horse to yours with the reim."

"Tie 'is 'orse to mine, sir?"

"Yes. Done that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now, he may be on the crooked, a spy—" the commencement of Theron's protest was cut short by a wave of the hand,—"who is going to lead us into a trap."

With that lack of judiciality which is so common and so sad a blot on the fairness of war, the bugler eyed the guide as if he had already committed this crime. Fitten continued: "In case he means to, I want you both to grasp that he is going to be the first man to die. Understand?"

"Oh yes, sir," replied the worthy bugler with an air of cheerful butchery, reaching out towards a man close behind him as he added, "Lend us your sticker, Joey!"

"No," said Fitten. "Take my revolver. Can you shoot with a revolver?"

"Never 'ad one in me 'and before, sir."

"Doesn't matter. You won't have long-range shooting. Take it in your right hand, keep the guide on your left. Point it at him—closer, touch him nearly. That's right; now you can't miss. Get my orders clear now, for if anything should happen, I can give you none. If you hear distant firing, don't shoot. If you hear sudden close firing, don't stop to find out whether it is at us or not, shoot the guide at once. You have six shots, mind."

"Yes, sir."

As he said this Bragges's fingers were already fidgeting round and inside the trigger-guard of the revolver. Not only was he a bugler of merit, but he was also a devoted performer on the cornet-à-piston, and as he sat in the dim light of the station lamps, the involuntary play of his two first fingers round the trigger of the weapon showed persistent practice at trills. An onlooker could only pray that it was not loaded, for the fingering of the musician was harrowing—especially to Theron.

"Oh, but, captain, may I die if I am——"

"You *will*, if you are," was the unsympathetic reply.

"But, Allermachte! look at his fingers."

"Bragges, take your fingers out of the trigger-guard. Don't put your finger in till you want to fire. I don't want you to shoot him by accident."

"Very good, sir."

"But, Captain, he may stumble."

"That's your luck."

The unhappy Theron groaned. It would at any time have annoyed him to see this oafish treatment of firearms. It was now agony. He had not bargained for this, and had indeed jumped from the frying-pan into the fire!

"Bragges,—say over your orders."

"Press the muzzle agin 'is ribs, sir, an' if any one fires close, shoot the blight,—beg pardon—the guide, I *should* say, sir."

"And don't let him go without orders from me."

"Very good, sir."

It was Bragges's great day. Fair bugler, execrable cornet-player, honest, worthy soldier, he had been through many exciting times since he left his home at Hoxton; but this beat all! He rose to the occasion. Cocking his head on one side, he protruded his chin, stuck his face almost into the other's, and said in a whisper of villainous ferocity, which smacked of the "Brit.": "Hi, you! Any monkey tricks an' you're my meat. Straight!"

The other did not reply,—he was quite hypnotised by the muzzle of the revolver, to which he was trying to slew himself sideways.

That being comfortably fixed up, while the men were tightening girths, rebuckling straps, and looking to magazines, the subaltern paced up and down—thinking.

## II.

"Same shootin' wild at the end o' the night,
Same flyin' tackle an' same messy fight,
. . . . . .
Same ugly 'iccup an' same 'orrid squeal,
When it's too dark to see an' it's too late to feel,
. . . . . ."

—Rudyard Kipling.

He did think—furiously. Presuming, firstly, that Theron was a bogus messenger, the alternatives of the enemy's action appeared to be as follows:—

If there really were a convoy, and the Boers had attacked it, they might wish to increase their bag, and might have sent in a messenger with the news as a bait to lead more "khakis" into a trap. If there really were no convoy, they might still have sent in the message in order to capture the only mounted men in Donkerstad, and so obtain rifles, ammunition, and remounts, or else they might wish merely to get the M.I. away, and thus weaken the garrison by its most seasoned soldiers before they attacked the place. Fitten quite felt what a thorn his M.I., continually prowling about under its energetic commander, must have been in the enemy's side. The burghers were very shrewd, and knew the nature and reputation of every regiment in South Africa. They had plenty of sympathisers now living in houses in Donkerstad, and probably even knew Fitten's Christian name,—

even that he had lost his hat! The township, though of no great strategic importance, would be a considerable prize, for it contained a large depôt of stores within its defences. Therefore, if the message was what Fitten termed—with his knowledge of Hindustani—a *bandô*, an ambush was to be expected in any case, anywhere beyond the outpost line. That was clear.

If, on the other hand, Theron were genuine, and the news that he had brought were true, the convoy might by now have been captured, and be trekking away, or might still be holding out. In either case, Fitten judged that the great De Wet, or any of the local "fighting parsons,"—none of them beginners,—would not have neglected to place a detached force on the road from the nearest garrison, to act as a surprise-packet for any attempt at relief.

Under any circumstances, therefore, it seemed that he must expect to run into more than a posse of the "Brethren" laying specially for him. That was the first thing to look for, and from bitter experience he knew the value of surprise and position as compared with mere bravery! But that was not the end. Supposing he did meet sudden opposition, he could not retire and wait for dawn. He must push on at once, at all costs,—"brush opposition aside" is the picturesque expression,—and try to catch up a possibly mythical convoy. "Brother" had very likely already made

a Little Slam. He only needed one more trick to make a Grand one.

To best meet an ambush entailed extension—dispersion; but on such a night that was impossible. Once his party extended, or even got into line, they would in ten minutes be as good as scattered all over the centre of Africa from Walfisch Bay to Basutoland, and would soon be shooting into each other. Once they scattered, also, the Honourable Aubrey would cease to be commanding officer,—he would be a unit of a company, simply a man with a rifle like any other. No; for any coherent action, he must, in spite of possible ambushes, keep his party together until forced to separate. Then every man must act for himself and must know what to do. Could he trust them to act on their own? He looked up as they stood there busy with last touches, stamping, chaffing, and grousing. They were, on the whole, a good lot of men, now almost veterans. Officer and men knew each other pretty well, for they had proved one another more than once.

Time was up. He got nearly all the men round him in a circle, and explained the main object of the night's work, and what they might expect to meet on the way. His final words were:—

"Remember, if we are not attacked, there is to be no extension until I give the order. I will give orders as usual. If we are attacked, open out a bit at once without orders. Don't dismount to

shoot; but gallop, gallop like hell, straight over the Boers. Stop for no one or nothing. Men who come down and lose their horses must lie and fire at the flash, to help the others. If I get through, I shall pull up about a mile beyond the enemy and keep blowing the whistle. If you hear it, rally towards it. If you don't hear it, don't wait; collect together and try and find the convoy. If it is trekking away, hang on till morning, then kill all the animals. Section commanders will try and collect groups of men round them and take command. Do you all understand?"

"Please, sir, how must we know who's got the convoy?"

"If it is trekking away, it is almost sure to be the Boers, but you must find out for *certain* by daylight. Once more, remember: If we are fired on—no orders—act on your own; I shall be somewhere towards the rear, and will follow you."

Fitten was beyond the stage of unnecessarily taking the imaginary post of danger unless it were also the post of greatest utility. In the present case, the first man to charge was no braver than the last, and the last could gather better from behind what was happening.

"Prepare to mount. Mount. Fours right. Walk march!" and the little column jingled off towards the outpost line. They were soon on the open veldt, and without any words fell into a trot, picking it up from the front. Ahead was the advanced "point" of the subaltern, the guide,

the bugler, and two men. Behind, there were connecting files just within earshot of each other, right back to the main body some two hundred yards behind. After the start the Commander fell back towards the rear.

The column jogged on, squelch, squelch in the wet darkness. As they advanced, the soft thuds of hoofs, the jingle of bits and of stirrups touching, were the only sounds to be heard. Eyes were blurred by rain, even ears were filled with icy drops, while bridle hands became numb with cold. Still they went on without halt and without check; now breasting a slight rise, now descending a gentle hollow, the inequality of the ground only observable from the pace of the horses and the change in balance. Then there was a check. Like the trucks of a long goods train coming to a stop, the various sections of fours were pulled up by running into the section in front. Was it something ahead? Had the guide gone astray? Had the—— No, it was only a small spruit, now swollen with rain, and soon the rear of the column was closing up again in a sloppy canter.

Fitten had done his best to prepare for every contingency, had taken all possible measures to ensure success, still it was a risky venture, and he was nervous—not with the nervousness of a jumpy man or coward, but with that born of knowledge and bitter experience. Any creature less irresponsible than a monkey or less sluggish

than an oyster would have—ought to have—been nervous. All the eggs were in one basket, and there was not a man there who did not realise it: to be massed together is the worst thing in case of an ambush. By that stage of the war every errand boy at home who stopped to read the war news from the bits of newspaper in which the chops were wrapped, could have told as much as this. Still, under the circumstances, it was the only way. No night-marches, with their attendant difficulties of time, space, and direction, and their sickening suspense, are pleasant, and this was by no means Fitten's first; but so far his side had always hoped to hold the trump-card—surprise. In this case it was odds on the enemy surprising them. It seemed rather hopeless—like walking into a trap. Still the Commandant was absolutely right—it had to be tried. He could not sit quiet while a convoy was being scuppered within a few miles. To wait till morning would have been too late.

Fitten was listening—listening all he could for a single report. Well he knew that solitary shot, followed by the hoarse shouts of "*Schiet kerl, schiet,*" and then the hellish outburst of the Mausers all round. Once experienced, the recollection of these sounds does not die. Was it coming? When was it coming? If things would only begin!

There was a sharp rattle ahead, and a nervous movement all down the ranks—a spontaneous

movement that could be felt, not seen or heard. Fitten's heart leaped. It was only the iron-shod hoofs of the leading files ringing out suddenly on a rocky outcrop in the veldt. No word was said aloud, but the leader was not the only man who experienced a hot wave of revulsion when the cause of the sound was recognised.

He thought of the gallop towards the enemy; the mad rush; the shouts; the whistle and smack of the bullets; the terrified animals shying off the flashes of the rifles as they got close, some —especially the Argentines—refusing and turning round; then the efforts at a concentration on the other side; the hunt for the convoy; the dragging fight and the long-drawn butchery of the cattle. How was it going to end for them? Would they be cut off? But that did not worry him much, provided that he succeeded in his job of stopping the convoy.

He thought of what would happen if they got too close to the enemy's trap to open out in time, and were caught in column by a cross-fire. Stellenbosch for him! Scare headlines in the papers at home! "Another regrettable incident!" "When will our officers learn sense?" "When will they take their profession seriously?" He had quite recently smelt the railway, and had browsed on old papers and knew the gush by heart. Letters of advice from half the quidnuncs in England, "Paterfamilias," "Taxpayer," "Constant Reader," and "Briton." How he would like

to have "Constant Reader" ahead to guide now, and "Taxpayer" alongside himself to advise!

He had plenty of time to cogitate, for on and on they jogged, and nothing happened. They must have come miles by this time, and the noise that they were making seemed enough to wake the dead. How his fingers ached! Curse the convoy for getting into a mess. Curse the commando that got it into a mess!

There was a check. The force was halting! He rode forward and met one of the "point," who was passing down the column, whispering hoarsely, "Mr Fitten! Mr Fitten!"

"Here. What is it?"

"The bugler says as the guide says as we are near the convoy now, sir. It's over the next rise."

At last! So far so good! Convoy or no convoy, this was not an ambush. He rode ahead and, by cannoning into the bugler, almost short-circuited the shivering guide's earthly career.

"Arsty[1] there; 'oo are you shovin'? Beg pardon, sir—I——"

"Well, Theron, what is it?"

"I am almost certain that the convoy is over the next rise—eh?"

"Was it in a hollow?"

"Yes, about half a mile from here. We had better dismount and walk on—eh?"

Fitten was not yet entirely trustful, but there

[1] Soldiers' Hindustani for "gently."

was no danger in this. The party was dismounted, the horses collected in the charge of about ten men. In spite of the dangers of lecturing, it was imperative that all should know what was going to happen, for the chances of misunderstanding, of some dreadful mistake, were many on such a night. As it was impossible to make the whole company hear without shouting, he collected the sergeants.

"The convoy may be beyond the next rise. Remember we don't yet know who has got it. We shall all go forward on foot, extended, to the bottom of the next rise. The company will wait there while I go forward to reconnoitre. While you are there, explain to your sections exactly what is going to happen, and wait a message sent back from me. Fix bayonets before you start. That clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Colour-sergeant, when you get my message to advance, collect the company — single rank and take it up to the top of the rise, where I shall leave a man. Then try and find out where the convoy is by listening, — you will probably see nothing. The whole of you will lie down and wait quietly. I may come back or send back. If *I do not*, lie where you are till dawn, and can see where and what the convoy is. If it is in the Boers' hands, extend all along behind the hill and start off shooting the animals. Got that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Horse-holders will follow to the foot of the hill — this side. If they hear real firing begin, they will lead as many horses as they can in the direction of Donkerstad; the others will follow. Repeat my orders, Sergeant Gilbert; the others listen."

After correcting one or two matters of detail, Fitten was satisfied that he was understood. The company extended and stumbled forward over ant-hills and stones towards the foot of the rise, where it halted. Fitten, with the guide, the bugler, and two men, crawled up to the top. Here the guide placed his hand on the officer's arm, seized his hand and stretched it down below towards the hollow — "They are there, Captain; listen!"

He could see nothing, but between his heart-beats, for they had squirmed up quickly, Aubrey heard the grunts, snorts, and squeals of mules and the rattle of chains. It was a convoy.

"Bragges, give me my revolver. Loose the guide. Theron, I am sorry — it couldn't be helped," were his words.

"All right, Captain."

"Do you think the Boers have got it?"

"It doesn't look like it; but I don't know how the small escort could have beaten off an attack."

"Well, I'm going down to see. Theron, you come with me. One of you two men — who are you?"

"Jones, sir."

"Weekes, sir."

"Jones, fix your bayonet, and come along. Weekes, stand up here till the company comes up, as a point. Bragges, you go and tell the colour-sergeant to bring it up here.

"Jones, listen. As soon as the company is here, we will crawl down and discover who has the convoy. I shall find a sleeping man and jump on him. You stand by with the bayonet. If he speaks English, all right! If he speaks Dutch, give it him. We don't want any trouble or noise. Don't stick me in the dark, mind."

"No, sir."

After a few minutes, with much stumbling and some whispering, the little force panted up to the top of the rise. Fitten again explained the direction to the colour-sergeant, then he and Jones started to crawl silently down the slope. They were soon among the waggons without challenge. There was no cry of "Halt, who goes there?" no cry of "Wies da?" as they stumbled over cooking-pots, over harness, over gear. Finally, the officer butted a mule, which squealed and cow-kicked him on the shoulder. Still no challenge! Jones was now holding the tail of his senior's "British warm," and the two were squirming about almost on all fours. They heard a human snore, and Fitten's spur caught in some object just behind a waggon. He stooped gently and felt it. It was a man's foot! Unluckily the owner was right under the

body of the waggon, out of the rain, not a very convenient position for—Jones.

"Jones, give me your hand. Feel this foot. When I give the word, you pull on this leg, I'll pull the other, and we'll yank this fellow into the open. Wait till you get the word, then heave and stand by with the bayonet."

As he softly groped about for the other leg, scruples crossed his mind. It was dirty, murderous work! But it had to be done.

"Heave!"

With a vicious tug a heavy man was dragged on his back from under the shelter of the waggon. Like a flash, and with a neatness which spoke well for his practice in the old mauling game which he used to play under the great elms of Rugby Close, this "gently-nurtured sprig of England's bluest," as the local paper had described the Honourable Aubrey Fitten when he came of age, was all over his man. There was a whistling grunt, for, with a foul dexterity, never learned, we hope, at Rugby, the gently-nurtured one had contrived at the same moment to wind the sleeper with his right knee, and to get both of his hands, thumbs meeting, firmly round his neck. He then rolled on to the mud on one side to clear the way for Jones. That worthy knelt down, felt the heaving body, then stood, arms reversed, with the bayonet's point touching it.

"Don't shout, or you're a dead man," whispered the senior assassin somewhat superfluously perhaps,

and both awaited the first utterance of the sleeper. Were it Dutch——! War is not nice, and no one knew how many burghers were round.

The tension was prolonged, for when a man is well winded, it does not matter whether his native tongue be Turkish, Taal, or Telugu, his first utterances will sound the same. The prostrate one had been well winded. This had its dangers. To the private, who was no scholar of Dutch, the stertorous wheezes that came from the gaping mouth sounded much like that guttural tongue. His superior luckily guessed as much and said, "Wait for my word." He then separated his thumbs the fraction of an inch and whispered again—almost affectionately: "If you shout, you are a dead man!"

A few more chokings, then in a voice, husky, but unmistakable, came the sign—

"'Oo the 'ell are you?"

These five words were enough. The officer got up; the private ordered arms with guilty promptness, hoping that the speaker had not felt the point.

So far, so good. The attack had evidently been beaten off, and Fitten, once the tension was relaxed, felt some compunction for the way he had treated his late victim. Being a perfect gentleman, his apology was as ample as it was prompt. "It's all right—I am an officer. Get up."

## III.

"Hush ye, hush ye, little pet ye,
Hush ye, hush ye, do not fret ye,
The Black Douglas shall not get ye."
—*Old Border Lullaby.*

Let us after this moment of intense suspense hark back some three hours to this same spot, at a time when the long straggling convoy had but recently outspanned for the night in the hollow on the veldt.

Except for the noise of the animals and the guttural clicking which represented the whispered conversation of the Kaffirs, the convoy was quite silent. At the end of a waggon, cheerfully swinging his legs, sat a man buried in a long cavalry cloak. It was raining in gusts, but No. 35,721, Trooper Ablett of the Oudtshoorn Mounted Fighting Scouts, ex-donkey-man of a tramp steamer, ex-cyanide hand of the "Deep Deep" of the Dumpers G.M. Company, was fairly well covered, and, as he would have expressed it, did not "give a d—n" for the rain. The convoy was outspanned for the night, and he had earned another five bob. Not that he thought only of money, but there it was,—he was a dollar to the good. He had also fed, having but recently finished his evening meal of coffee, biscuit, and trek-ox. That was the trouble! The coffee was not good, and though no epicure, he didn't hanker after ration biscuit; but

it was the trek-ox that worried him. They had been forced to shoot one of their animals, and the meat had that day been issued as a treat—fresh meat instead of the everlasting preserved ration. Now Ablett sorely needed the attentions of a dental surgeon, and found the stringiness of the daily bully-beef bad enough; but the so-called treat was far worse. He sat clinking his rusty spurs together to the refrain of the popular song he was humming, all the time thoughtfully exploring his mouth with a stem of grass, for toothpicks were not items of the "Vocabulary of stores" kept in ordnance depôts. What the Boer *winkels*[1] had once stocked, he could not tell—the war had been going on too long. Of a cheerful, irresponsible disposition, nothing worried him much, and his present and quite new occupation of "fighting, scouting" trooper came all in the day's work. He had been many things on the Rand and in other parts of the world, and took things as they came. He was drawing his dollar a-day, with free *skoff*;[2] was a mounted man now on escort duty; the life was pretty free, and there was every chance of a scrap, for there were many rumours of De Wet raiding and burning between the Orange and the Vaal. He was happy enough, and saw no trouble "sticking out." The one fly in the amber of his present content was the absence of a daily issue of toothpicks.

His occupation kept him busy for some time.

[1] Stores. [2] Food.

When he had finally settled matters to his satisfaction, he pulled a pipe of exaggerated dimensions from one pocket, spooned up half a handful of powdered "*Megaliesburg*"[1] from another, and with a muttered, "Ikona trek-ox," lit up. Happening, in the flickering blaze of the match, to notice his rifle lying in the end of the waggon, it suddenly flashed across his mind that an hour ago he had sat down with the intention of cleaning it. He had fired a few shots at buck during the day's trek, and had intended to borrow oil-bottle and pull-through, which he no longer possessed, from a comrade and do the job, but now it was so late. Every one seemed asleep. Ginger Tigg was under the next waggon.

"Ginger! I say, Ginger—eh?" No answer.

"I say, Gin—ger!"

"Hullo. What's that?" in a sleepy grunt.

"Have you got an oil-bottle and a pull-through?"

"Go to ——! Ikona!" was the surly reply.

That was sufficient! He was not looking for trouble, and was certainly not going to crawl round in the rain, waking up men to be sworn at. The Captain was not likely to inspect arms before they reached Donkerstad in the morning, and then there would be the wealth of an ordnance store to draw upon. He took up the rifle and sniffed at it. He could not see the fouling, but, by gum! he could smell it—it had been in some hours.

[1] A brand of Boer tobacco.

Now the regulations lay down very clearly and definitely how firearms should be cleaned. Though he had never read these instructions, never seen the book, or even heard of Hythe,[1] Ablett knew a thing or two, and one thing he well realised was that the longer a rifle remains dirty the more the barrel becomes eaten away. He had a brilliant idea. He would blow out the old fouling with a shot or two and the result of his fresh shots would only remain for a few hours before the weapon was cleaned. Better two foulings of short duration than one of long standing. After all, he was not without some ideas on the erosive action of the products of combustion of the nitro-glycerine compounds, though they were perhaps more the children of laziness than of scientific knowledge.

He got down from his seat, looked round the invisible horizon for some mark at which to aim, saw nothing, put up his gun and fired two shots "rapid" into the night. The echoes had not died away before there were oaths and shouts of "What's up?" "Where are they?" "Hurry up there!" and the clicking of cut-offs being opened, as half a dozen men came dodging up. Artistic, and instructive even to the ex-donkey-man, ex-cyanider, was the language he heard when the cause of the alarm was fully made known. When the sergeant finally stumbled over the *dissel-boom*[2]

[1] The School of Musketry of the British Army.
[2] Pole.

of the waggon on to the little group, there was much talk of "making prisoners," reports to the Captain. However, the alarm was not generally taken up—the shots had been fired from the lee end of the convoy, and not much harm had been done. With Irregulars many highly irregular things occur, and such a trifling incident was quickly forgotten. Peace soon reigned over the outspan, and the tattoo of the rain from the waggon roofs was once more only broken by the clank of chains and the scuffling and snorts of the mules.

But, unknown to the sleeping force, a man was now far on his way "ploughing the lonely furrow" towards Donkerstad, laden with terrible news, for though no one in the convoy close by had been much perturbed by the rifle-shots, there was one not so callous—our friend Frickie Theron, trooper in the same "push" as Ablett.

About the same time that his comrade was worrying over the partiality of meat fibre for his dental interstices, Theron was seated on an ant-hill on the far side of the slight rise, down wind of the bivouac, within hearing of the convoy, and some half-mile away. He was sitting huddled up in his "British warm" in the lee of his horse, which stood tail up-wind, shivering above him. The two were quite alone in the night, and the beast, seeking sympathy, slewed round gradually, and nosed about till its velvety muzzle was resting on its master's shoulder. He got up in response to this token of comradeship, and leaning over the

animal's neck, patted it. He stood thus for a long time stroking the hogged mane. As his hand passed to and fro, a shower of fine spray was flung from the bristles into his face. It tickled him, and in a way relieved the tension. Frickie was nervous to-night.

By no means backward in facing danger as a rule, and by no means one of the white-livered brigade, there were at present special reasons why he, an Afrikander of Dutch extraction, who had elected to fight for the British, should feel uncomfortable. They were crossing the favourite hunting-ground of the redoubtable Christiaan De Wet, also Theron's own district, and it would be specially awkward to be captured here, above all by De Wet. Theron did not particularly wish to meet any Boers at the moment. In other words—to paraphrase the reply, now classic from Table Bay to the Zambesi, of the Peruvian *Smaus*[1] when invited to go out hunting lions—"He had not lost any." Against British, German, Swede, Russ, or Turk he would not have cared a button; but against De Wet in his own country, he did care.

He was mounted orderly on duty. Not altogether scout, not altogether sentry, he was simply placed at some distance from the convoy in order to be in a position to ride off to the nearest garrison or post and give the alarm in case of attack. A convoy is an amorphous mass,

[1] Polish Jew pedlar.

as helpless and slow as a garden slug. Without a large escort, which is waste of fighting men, it is dependent on extraneous assistance for defence, and is therefore a curse and a source of anxiety to every commander within whose area it drags its tempting, helpless length. This convoy, though a large one, had a very small escort: besides a few Army Service Corps non-commissioned officers, there were some thirty odd of the O.F.M.S.

Theron had done this job before; not that he liked it, though it suited his present frame of mind—but he was the local expert, and was supposed to know his way across country in the dark. Many hours had he spent alone on the veldt, and as he stood there making much of his horse, his own guerilla instincts told him what a splendid night it was for a night attack. Not sufficiently rough to impede trekking in a known district, it was cold and rainy enough to keep every garrison snugly under cover and to obscure an advance, and windy enough to drown all but the nearest sounds—altogether a very likely night.

Suddenly the report of a rifle sounded from the direction of the convoy. Theron started, as did his mount. He seized the reins and unslung his rifle.

Was it fancy? No, for his horse had heard it and had whinnied. "Pick-pock"—again the report rang out, and with a smack something hit an ant-hill on the rise just above him and sang off wailing into the darkness. "At him, too! Allermachte!"

That settled it. Two shots in succession was the alarm signal. There was no more hesitation. In a trice he was in the saddle galloping smartly down a slight hollow towards Donkerstad, parallel to, but not on, the main track: that would be certainly watched by a detached party to cut off messages for relief. After going a mile, the danger zone crossed, he turned on to the track, pulling up into a loping canter.

As he rode the first mile he fancied that he heard a regular fusilade faintly coming down wind towards him. As he slowed down this gradually got fainter: when he ceased galloping the firing had died away in the distance. But in his excitement Theron had forgotten to make allowance for the thudding of hoofs, the walloping of his bandolier, and the rattle of the biscuits against the ration-tin in his haversack.

He did not draw rein until a few dim lights in the distance warned him of the nearness of the outposts and barbed wire of the township, and it was not until he heard the voice of the sentry from Bonnie Scotland that he drew up. With what sort of welcome we know.

. . . . . .

But to return to the Honourable Aubrey. The recumbent figure slowly rose and began to feel its throat with both hands.

"Who are you?"

"Number four ought six double five two, Staff-Sergeant Sutler, A.S.C."

"Yes, yes. What is this convòy?"

"Captain Limas's, to Vereeniging.

"Have you beaten them off?"

"Beaten who off?"

"Why, man alive, the enemy!"

"Enemy? What enemy, sir?"

Fitten was stupefied. Could this fat slug of a man have slept through the fight? He dismissed the idea. "Haven't you been attacked?"

"Attacked? N-a-a-o-w!"

Fitten's mind at once reverted to poor little Donkerstad, now undermanned and probably in danger. One more question would settle it. "Then why the devil did you send in a messenger to ask for help?"

Now this was not correct. The officer commanding the convoy was the only person to whom such a question should have been addressed; but Fitten's mind was set on weightier matters than etiquette. It was a mistake nevertheless, and the aggrieved "non-com." was not slow to perceive it. As he resettled his double chin he began to think of his dignity and the respect due to his position. He was not one of your touchy men; but still, for a staff-sergeant of his seniority to be heavily mauled, winded, and half-throttled before a private, who he could feel was grinning, was distinctly ruffling. He replied in that tone of injured reproach so well known to junior officers who have unwittingly committed a *faux pas*.

"*We've* sent no messenger, sir—leastways, as

far as I am aware of. But perhaps the commanding officer could tell you that better than me, sir."

"Fetch him."

Fitten had grasped the sense of the other's words, but not the implied reproof nor the aggrieved tone. He had, moreover, made matters worse by sending for his senior officer.

Then his second theory was right! That brute *was* a spy after all, and had led them out on a wild-goose chase! He looked round for the guide, but in vain. He called his name with like success, and derived little comfort when Private Jones tactfully remarked—"I ain't seen him since we started to crawl, sir. Just after *you* give the order to loose him, sir!" Possibly Donkerstad was now sacked and burned! It was sickening to be fooled like this: more sickening that the man who had done it should be free! But Fitten was practical, and dragged his thoughts back to the circumstances in which he was placed. First, it was necessary to collect his own men, who were all waiting up above. What if some fool should begin to fire now?

He despatched Jones with the message, and in the course of a few minutes all his band were collected round him. His first inquiry was of the bugler.

"Where is the guide?"

"'E went orf as soon as *you* ordered me to loose him, sir. I thought 'e was with you, sir!"

No shouts or inquiries produced Theron. He preferred the chances of De Wet to the chances of the trigger-finger of Bugler Bragges, and had vanished into the night, more relieved even than the convoy.

Before hurrying back to the assistance of the township, Fitten decided to wait and interview the officer in charge. The whole thing, culminating in the lack of military precautions and the absolutely undefended state of the convoy, was shameful, and demanded some explanation. In the language of the prospector, he saw trouble "sticking out."

Short in temper, and dishevelled in appearance, was the O.C. when he did appear, and by no means grateful to his would-be rescuers. But such is life. Retiring for privacy behind a waggon, the two commanders had a short interview. After a curt prelude, voices were gradually raised; the discussion lost its discreet and official tone, and became a straight man-to-man talk of a nature which a respect for discipline and for "conduct becoming, &c.," precludes from repetition. To the soldiers standing within earshot, the words in season then flung about by their superiors were perhaps some compensation for what they had gone through; but to those who did not suffer that night they would only bring pain,—human nature in its arm-chair at home is apt not to make allowances for human nature under such conditions. The interview was as short as it was sweet,

and the leaders parted even more in anger than in sorrow. The rescuers turned homewards, and on the way were nearly fired on by a company of infantry—their support—which was lying soaked and silent on a small rocky outcrop half-way back.

The empty lobster tin was still chattering sadly in the midst of the entanglement near the sentry's post, when, at the grey of dawn, the very bedraggled relief force loomed up out of the rain-haze. The faces of officers and men were not cheerful to look upon, and the sentry cursed his own clumsiness as his benumbed fingers fumbled with the fastenings of the barbed-wire gateway.

The future history student of pedantic and unnecessary accuracy, who may wish to verify facts and to inquire into the just apportionment of censure, as recorded in the finding of the Court which eventually assembled, will easily find the evidence attached to the proceedings carefully guarded in the archives of Records, F.F.S.A., Base, C.T.

# The Joint in the Harness.

"A dreadful sound is in his ears: in prosperity the destroyer shall come upon him."—(The Book of Job.)

"Railways are the arteries of modern armies. Vitality decreases when they are blocked, and terminates when they are permanently severed."—('Imperial Strategy,' 1906.)

## I.

"Hiss—click—*Bang*."

The monster pile sank perceptibly as the monkey descended with a thud, and the ooze at its foot quivered in ripples of protest which expanded into circles of silver where they caught the electric light. A gout of oil shooting out on to the mud formed a blot of nacreous colour, slowly fading as it spread, and became lost in the film of scum. The steam pile-driver rained vicious blows with almost the precision of a Nasmyth hammer, its armoured-hose steam-pipe kicking convulsively in the air in a grotesque dance to the measure.

A young man sat in his shirt-sleeves smoking, watch in hand. He was a pleasant-looking young fellow—the engineer officer on duty. Every now and again he made a note in a pocket-book as he

took the time, for he was timing progress. Slow work it seemed to him, this advance by inches, as each blow produced small visible result in the tenacious silt; but if slow it was sure and not entirely mechanical, for every stroke with its hiss-click-bang seemed to him to say in a tone of cheerful confidence, "*so*-much-done," "*sso*-much-DONE." The pile-driver regulated the progress.

The honest fellow who was apathetically jerking at the string of the steam regulator did not seem to be moved by any such thoughts. A sleek man, he puffed contentedly at his pipe, quite oblivious to the beautiful iridescence of the condensed steam and lubricating oil which showered over him from the exhaust at each stroke. His companion in this shower-bath sat on the edge of the coal-bunker, fumbling, after the fashion of his kind, with a piece of dirty waste. His gaze wandered from the wobbling needle of the pressure-dial to the water dancing up and down in the gauge-glass in the dim light of the oil-lamp. Occasionally he rose and opened the furnace door to throw in a shovelful of coal, thus casting a warm red glow over the glistening objects at railhead. For this spot was "Railhead," which was to be hastily pushed across the river on this temporary pile-bridge at low level, pending the slower repair of the high-level girder-bridge.

The pile-driving machine was carried on a caterpillar-like truck of many wheels, some of which were clamped to the rails of the bridge.

At its rear end was the boiler; in front, supported by long arms, which overhung the end of the bridge by some distance, was the gaunt framework and guide, almost hugging the pile which the monkey above was maltreating. The end of the bridge had reached a point about the centre of the river, where the water shoaled on to a sandy mud-flat; but from below the many-wheeled truck, back to the near bank of the river, the dark stream was swirling against the piles, a man's height underneath. So swift was the current, that it was not good to gaze for long down between the sleepers at the oily water streaking past with a chuckle, from the moonlight into the shadow of the bridge and out into the light again.

Behind the pile-driver, by the loaded trucks, waited a group of men. They were for the time all quite idle, pending the arrival of their turn with its allotted task. Some were lying asleep, some were leaning against trucks smoking, or sitting on the rails, head in hand, elbows on knees; others were squatting on the timbers playing a mysterious game of cards by the light of a naked candle, which burned steadily without a shade in the still air. In their dirty suits of dungaree, it was not possible to say exactly what these men were. To a soldier, however, the fact that these were soldiers was hinted at by the action of some. One was drumming with two bolts on a fish-plate, keeping time to the lilt of a rollicking rag-time air which a second was softly playing on a mouth-organ.

Whatever their race,—for music-halls have made rag-time music international,—it was more like a soldier than an ordinary workman to produce a mouth-organ to keep things going in the small hours of the morning. Their talk settled the point: they were soldiers—sappers, to be exact.

Their task would soon come, when at the last stroke of the monkey a new pile would have to be hauled into position, or, if a pile-pier were completed, the heavy baulks be placed, and the sleepers and rails spiked down. Then the cumbrous, caterpillar truck would be slowly pushed forward over the creaking timbers of the newly-finished span to a fresh position, where its pæan of brute force would start again. Behind these men, along the pile-bridge, stretched a line of trucks loaded with baulks, rails, and sleepers; and alongside, downstream, floated fresh piles, swaying to and fro in the stream as they waited to be towed out in their turn. In the half gloom they looked like captive saurians, as the flood foamed against the blunt snouts and their wet edges gleamed.

There was bustle, there was haste, but there was also method on this low-level bridge. For long periods comparative calm reigned, with no other sound than the hiss of steam, the rush of the water, the roar of the high-pressure flare-lights, the distant clang of the riveters' hammers on high, and the refrain of the pile-driver, monotonous on the night air as the tom-tom obligato of a Persian nautch-song. But when the whistles shrilled, this peace,

such as it was, changed to turmoil. Sheaves squealed in the blocks, men grunted as they hove on the falls of tackles, and bolts and spikes were hammered home. The insistent keynote of the scene was work—strenuous, unresting work.

The river was wide. Even allowing for the deceptive moonlight, it seemed a quarter of a mile from bank to bank. A burnished strip in the bright light of a full moon, it was dotted here and there with eyots that stood out dark. It flowed between steep banks at the bottom of an amphitheatre—a complete circle of hills, save for the gaps through which ran the river and the railway which had crossed it.

Away on the far side, starting from a point on the dry sand, in prolongation of the pile-bridge, and swinging in a double curve up the steep bank, were a number of smoking naphtha-lamps. Below, in the bed of the river, groups of men were digging out boulders, the metallic click of their crowbars sounding faintly across the water. Ant-like strings of workers were carrying the loosened stones to a causeway which was growing up in alignment with the bridge. Higher up, following the curve of lights, and silhouetted against clouds of illumined dust, a swarm of toilers were excavating the cutting which was to take the steep deviation loop from the level of the pile-bridge up to the main line.

But after all, neither this bridge nor its approaches—though at present the centre of pressure

and activity—were the feature of the scene; for right up, sixty feet above, loomed the broken high-level bridge. With its huge girders and titanic piers it dwarfed its lowly neighbour and dominated everything, its grandeur accentuated by the chasm of the break in its centre. In this gap stood three unharmed piers, like sentries, gaunt, black, and shining. A fourth—the damaged pier—was surrounded by a cluster of staging and tall derrick-masts dripping ropes and tackle, and was completed on top by a funnel mouth, the undersides of which stood out darkly against the arc-light above. In the centres of three of the broken spaces were large timber stages, each in a different state of completion, but all alike in that they twinkled with lights and swarmed with men, some climbing, some in slings, but all hammering, boring, or sawing like demons. Between the piers lay the broken girders, moved to one side, half in half out of the water—a network of iron through which the muddy river foamed. Above the derricks and the tangle of cordage—carried on timber frames placed at intervals along the girders—two steel cables gleamed in the moonlight. Every few minutes, with the bleat of a motor-horn, a dark body, upon which glowed a red lamp, silently glided out upon them from one end of the bridge to a point above the broken pier. It stopped, a trap opened, and a glistening cascade of concrete poured with a rattle into the maw of the funnel and so down into the hollow iron pier. Then the

dark body slid back to its lair at the bridge end as silently as it had come out. Beyond, under the big girders, could be seen a floating bridge which stretched from bank to bank.

The spectacle of the colossal bridge reaching out majestically from each dim bank, with this gaping wound in its centre, was pathetic. The blank ends stood up opposite each other, dumb but reproachful witnesses of the havoc below.

From a little distance it was quite a fairy scene. Over all shone the great moon. Above the high-level bridge the blinking arc-lamps shed their violet rays, thrown downwards by the shades, so that they formed shimmering cones with edges clear defined against the night beyond. In contrast, the under side of the girders seemed cut of black velvet, and the shadows danced darkly on the water. The riveters' fires along the girders glowed red, the flare-lights on the low-level bridge shone yellow, and golden was the glare on the dust-clouds on the far bank. The crudity of the colours was in places softened by the spirals of escaping steam, winding aloft in the calm night air, and the whole gamut of illumination was reproduced in the drawn-out reflections which quivered across the glistening waters to the sluggish pools near the shore.

The low-level bridge was not a safe place to walk about, for there were loose planks, greasy spots, bights of ropes, and other traps for the unwary, and things were continually falling. Sometimes a

red-hot rivet would drop from above with a flop and a hiss into the river. Occasionally a warning shout of "stand clear!" would ring out, followed by a crash, and perhaps a couple of men would slowly bear away something on a stretcher to the shore. But no one else stopped; there was no sympathetic gathering; the work continued without a pause.

Now and again from a hill-top to the north the darkness was pierced by a succession of flashes. Flash, flash, came the reply from somewhere to the south, and then—a long medley of dots and dashes between the two points. No use to try and read the messages, even for one knowing the code, for these were in cipher. If there were still any doubt as to the nature of the toilers this would settle the matter, for no civil works could require signalling-posts on the hills around.

. . . . . .

The moon grew more mellow as she sank. A mist rose from the waters, creeping up till it lay a solid white mass over the river, half-way up the giant piers—a damp mist suggestive of malaria—not one to spend a night in; but no workers left the bridge.

The moon faded blood-red into the haze. The air turned colder as the night wore on. Another day dawned, at first grey and sad, then rosy and golden. But, heedless of the glory of the changing heavens, the workers toiled on, and, though muffled,

there could be heard rising from the moist white blanket the song of the pile-driver.

. . . . . .

The mist curled off the water in thin wisps in the warmth of the rising sun; the lights went out and the scene of the night's toil stood revealed. The day exposed all the squalor, grime, and discomfort, —the muddy swirling water, the wet and weary men, the burnt-out lamps, dripping timbers, and rusty iron-work. Even those iridescent blots which had seemed so beautiful in the light of the moon or the glare of electricity, showed up for what they were—foul pools of viscid oil or tar.

The glamour of the night had indeed gone, but not the need for work, and the toilers still strove, for they were working for their comrades of the army ahead — perishing for want of food and in danger owing to the lack of munitions of war.

## II.

It was again night.

Throughout the livelong day the work had proceeded as shift relieved shift.

It was not till some time after the mist had risen that the same young engineer, once again on night duty, left the work. Closing his note-book, he picked his way, stepping carefully from sleeper to sleeper, lantern in hand, along the low-level bridge,

which had grown in length and by now passed the little mud-flat. He buttoned his jacket as he went, for, no longer at work, he felt the damp chill of the mist, which was dripping from his hair and moustache. A thick-set man, his squatness was exaggerated by his bulging pockets filled with note-books; from one protruded a foot-rule. As he passed under the glare at the end of the bridge he smiled. Of a sanguine temperament, he was cheered by the progress of his work at a time when others were depressed. Stumbling on abstractedly over the lighted area into the comparative gloom over the dry mud beyond, he had just climbed above fog-level and proceeded scarcely a hundred yards when a hoarse voice addressed him from the shadow of a bush, where a man was sitting smoking. It was that of the Railway Traffic Officer—otherwise known as the "Shunter."

"Well, my Captain of Plumbers, how goes it? Aren't you across yet?"

"Hullo, is that you? I'm just off up to see my Chief. What are you doing down here, away from your beloved yard? What is your grumble now? Come, talk with me a while and learn something."

"Oh, I'm taking half an hour off, watching the illuminations and looking for you in this deadly mist. Things above are quite hopeless. Sit down and smoke."

"Not I: I'm too cold. You come and stroll, or dance with me all in the moonlight, you old truck-fancier." With that he executed a *pas*

*seul*, scuffling about in what he called a "cellar flap."

The other got up and joined him, but not in the dance. A taller and older man, he was thin and hollow-chested. There was light enough to see that he wore uniform, and had a serious expression. He coughed violently.

"I say, it's just as well you don't have to work in that mist; you would soon cease to trouble us. With that cough, I can forgive you for hogging it in the lap of luxury up above, so snug among your trucks. Walk as far as the pontoons?"

With that the "Plumber" took a frayed cigar out of his pocket and examined it ruefully, and the two strolled off towards the invisible pontoon-bridge.

"You seem very cheerful, young man, and not as if you had just spent half a shift in that fog. Have you struck a spouting-well of liquid gold with that beastly noise machine of yours, or have you discovered a ford fit for railway traffic? What is it? *I* don't see much to dance about."

The "Shunter" was not of a sanguine temperament, and was a much-worried man. Moreover, as time went on he had not the satisfaction of seeing visible progress made. On the contrary, every hour made his position more hopeless and more complicated.

"That's just it; we should make the most of all our little gifts, and smile at anything we can, just now. Old man, she's a beauty. That little steam

pile-driver is going to save the situation—to save the Third Army. Just listen to her now, snorting and butting so prettily down there. It's music."

He continued, "I've now timed another four spans—sixteen more beastly piles—being put in, and it will take us, at the present rate, barring cataclysms, just fifty-one hours from midnight, say forty-eight from now, till the rails are fished up and the first train runs across. Let's see; this is Monday morning. That is, by three o'clock the morning after next—Wednesday. I told my Chief six o'clock, yesterday, and as the Commandant has wired that all over the Theatre——"

"What the deuce are you talking about?" snarled the other.

"I thought you'd say that; why, the Theatre of Operations, of course. All the papers call it that. Over the whole blooming country, if you like it better."

There was only a grunt for reply.

"I shall let it stay at that, which will give me a margin of three hours for 'unforeseen contingencies'; not that it is necessary, 'cos there ain't going to be any. I've foreseen all. The men want no driving, they are still working like devils. I tell you, '*Mit* Hast, ohne Rast' is our motto; but I wonder how long they can stand the strain. Some are already used up. Eight hours on and eight hours off is pretty stiff, you know, and the mist knocks out all the chesty ones. But it's the——"

"Yes, yes, what's the use of giving me all this flip-flap? I'm not a correspondent. Come to the point."

"Well, I think the Third Army should see the first train reach them, say, at noon on Wednesday; followed, I suppose, by a solid stream of 'em. However, *my* job's done when the first train gets across."

"Oh, I'll shove trains enough across when the time comes, but they won't be the ones they want first. Before I prepare for this great event, tell me, are you *sure?* Have you taken every factor into your calculations—made allowance for everything?"

"Yes, old croaker, everything. I've foreseen every single thing within the wildest dreams of probability. The deviation approach on this side is already done, and is working. The earthwork on the other side 'll be done in twelve hours and the rails laid in twelve more, so all that will be done before my show. If only we could have put in trestles instead of piles, we should have been across this cursed river by now." He paused a moment in thought and the two paced on in silence.

"I am sorry for the never-to-be-sufficiently-execrated fool who reported that this river could be trestled. He will be the cause, if the army gets scuppered; but he'll probably arrange to be killed, I should think. Anyway, taking the pile-bridging as the slowest part, it is the ruling factor, and fixes

the time, and I tell you it is moving—'*Mit* Hast, ohne Rast' is our——"

"Oh, damn your motto; if you say it again, or talk of Sturm und Drang, I'll hit you. How about accidents—floods?"

"All right, all right; slowly, softly, catchee monkey. There's not the remotest chance of any accident. I have crowds of timber, piles, and stuff all ready. The driver ain't a sensitive plant exactly. Boiler 's new and working at low pressure. As to floods, the glass is high, they can give us forty-eight hours' warning of any storm away up in the hills, and anyway it's got to be a biggish flood to rise over my bridge—and that will be finished in fifty-one—I mean, forty-eight hours. Besides, even if we do have a flood, so long as we are able to rush across all the trucks you have in your yard —and some engines—before it arrives, it won't much matter. That little lot will be enough to keep the army shooting and eating for some days, by which time the high-level bridge will be repaired enough to run over—then so much for the enemy's great demolition!"

"How about their interfering?"

"This place simply stinks of men now since we got the extra infantry and guns—you know that perfectly well. They would need a much larger force than they can spare to attack us. The footling breaks they make in the line ahead don't count; they are made good as soon as done. They can't touch us here, and this is *the* spot." He

sighed, as he continued: "What a time those poor devils at the front must have had! We've not been sitting on plush settees eating oysters exactly,—but we've always got our 'vittles reg'lar.' Now, you tell. I am so busy down below, I hear nothing of what's going on."

"I only know that they have further reduced rations, how much reduced I can't say, as the Chief naturally keeps a good deal of the worst news to himself. They've fired almost their last round of gun ammunition, they have had a lot more sickness in the last two days, and they are now dying like flies. It's touch and go whether they can last. It's awful."

"I suppose you're working your head off."

"Pretty well. I do nothing but send and answer wires, receive traffic, and see stray idiots who want to go to the 'Front.' The yard's so crowded with trucks we can't move. I have now 453, including 45 of ammunition; we have already added ten extra sidings, and shall have many more down by the time you're through with the bridge. And what annoys me is, that though I wire till I am blue to stop all trains, the fools keep on automatically cramming up more. They say that the little bridge away back at 94 is weak, and they're rushing everything over they can, in case it breaks. That's your doing. That comes of you scamping your work."

"Couldn't help it; had to get through. It has already carried more trucks than you can deal with,

so I don't see what you are grousing about. After we've done here I can see to it again."

"You'd think they might know at the front what a state we are in here; place stiff with trucks chock-a-block. Well, the supply officer comes to me with all the fool-telegrams he gets, asking for individual pet trucks to be sent up with first train. Single trucks to be sorted out from this mess, mind you! They'll be damned lucky to get any train at all. I must just let them have what comes—I can't shunt. They would have had five trains of forage first, if I hadn't been able to off-load it."

"That's all very well, my boy; but you'll be hanged if you don't send up trucks in the exact order they're wanted. That's what you're for, to sort out and arrange trucks, nothing else. When their stomachs are full, and their tails are up again, they will remember, and some one on the Staff will say: 'Where is that incompetent officer who sent up truck 45672 loaded with Gruyère, instead of 45627 loaded with Double Glo'ster? Haul him out! Try him! Shoot him! Waster!—doesn't know his job.' They won't believe you were crowded; not they. Oh yes, whatever happens you'll be hanged all right."

With that he whistled offensively.

"Daresay. Can't help it. Can't off-load and re-load without room. As you are here, I wish you would come up and see after Numbers eleven and twelve sidings. There is some hitch, and they

are not shoving on as they should. That's one reason why I was looking out for you. I'm expecting two more trains before morning. The main line will be solid with trains and cold engines soon—a lot are cold already, — the brutes have emptied the boilers to make their coffee."

"Right-o. Cheer up. I'll come up on my way, though it's against 'professional etiquette.' It's not my job."

"By the way, we caught a brute in plain clothes about two hours ago up near the forage. He had a lot of fuzees, and dropped a can of kerosene. We tried him on the spot, and——"

"Yes, we heard a volley, and wondered what it was."

"Just imagine, if the forage had been set on fire. How are you against that sort of thing down here?"

"Outpost system excellent——"

"I know, but I mean single spies. One man with a stick of dynamite or gelatine would upset all your precious sanguine estimate. Have you allowed for that possibility?"

"That's all right," chuckled the other. "The place is so well guarded that not a man could get to the bridge, dynamo, or engines, without being seen. It's all lit up near the shore ends, and where required, like a billiard-table. They can't get near it, unless they have trained birds or rats to carry dynamite on their tails—eh, what?"

The idea tickled them, and both laughed as they

arrived at the deserted pontoon-bridge—all strained into a curve by the current. A guard at the end, and sundry cable-watchers seated on the decks of the pontoons, cross-legged like images of Buddha, were the only signs of life.

"Pretty dreary for those poor devils in the mist," said the engineer. "Why is there no road traffic now?"

"No transport. We've sent up all we have and can get. That big capture took a lot; crowds of animals have died and motors broken down. Anyway, road transport is no good to deal with the bulk we have to handle. No one expected such delay here, thanks to that infernal fool. The railway is the only thing possible—railway and trucks." Trucks were his obsession.

Turning back towards the pile-bridge, they went down into the mist, where an engine was standing on the low level; and, with much panting from the little locomotive and shrieking of wheels against guard-rails, they were soon speeding out of the mist up the steep grade and sharp curves of the newly laid deviation-approach.

As they moved along their nostrils were greeted with a succession of odours, ranging from the stench of river mud, through that of dead animals and refuse-pits, up to that of tarpaulins and forage, as they got in the station yard. From the top of the bank the white tents of the sleeping troops in the different camps could be seen, for by this time many men as well as trucks had collected at this

congested spot, and there was quite a small army composed of "details," detachments, and individuals seeking their regiments,—the flotsam and jetsam of the communications.

The yard, that seemed to weigh so much on the "Shunter's" mind, was a maze of loaded trucks—nothing but rolling stock. He must indeed have been a fancier, this railway traffic officer, for his collection was large and varied. Here were covered trucks, open trucks, box trucks, short trucks, bogie trucks, black trucks, brown trucks, grey trucks,—all full of supplies for the army ahead. This mass had overflowed the original fan of sidings, and fresh ones had been laid everywhere, inside the yard, outside the yard, even down the streets of the little village—everywhere where the ground was fairly level. At one corner stood huge mountains of forage, some not even covered. At frequent intervals in the lanes between the lines of rail strode sentries. Above spluttered electric lights, whose beams were reflected from the shining tarpaulins, and in places there were lamps under the waggons to illumine the dark corners where a man might lurk. On high the lights on the signal-posts twinkled derisively as they waited for the traffic which did not come. The station itself was a roofless ruin.

The engineer proceeded towards a cloud of dust lit up by flare-lights which showed the position of the work on the new sidings, leaving the "Shunter" in his element. After very few minutes he picked

his way over to the office of the Commandant, to report to his own Chief, who was there. The Commandant was busy, even at this hour, for he had just got a chance of a talk on the wire to his distressed senior, the Commander-in-Chief of the Third Army. As the "Plumber" entered, he heard—

"Yes, sir, we shall be through without fail at six on Wednesday morning, and you will have your first train in the afternoon.—What?—Yes.—What?—No, that's the very best we can do.—*Afternoon* of Wednesday.—Yes, sir—yes.—Till then.—Of course—I know.—Yes.—We are—hustling all we know——" The speaker looked up as the "Plumber" entered.

"Hullo. You've not come to tell me that you're going to put off the time of getting through again?"—he snarled in his anxiety. "You've heard what I told the Chief? Is that still right?"

"Quite right, sir; same time—six on Wednesday morning," was the reply.

"I'll tell him again—'Hullo—hullo——' Nonsense—eh, what?—line cut again? Damn them, they cut the line every two minutes. This is the first talk I've had with the Chief for thirty-six hours. However, I told him the main thing luckily. I wish they had their wireless!"

For five minutes the "Plumber" conferred with his own Chief, who was in charge of all the bridging operations, and was then dismissed. "I'm

glad all is going so well—you'd better be getting back—good night."

"Poor old Commandant," he thought, as he strode away in the gloom, for the moon was just setting,—"no wonder he is a bit ratty, with this responsibility and strain." Just then he almost ran into the "Shunter," who was gazing up into the still luminous sky towards the West.

"Did you see that?" the latter shouted.

"No—what?"

"Something passed overhead; sort of blur in the sky; heard something too—soft noise like a motor."

They both looked up. There was nothing in the serene sky but the after-glow of the moon.

"Bird?" suggested the "Plumber."

"Much too big for a bird."

"Vulture—bat—goose—mongoose?" he went on, evidently sceptical, then quickly added—

"Look here, my man, get to bed and rest; you're jumpy from worry and want of sleep. Go to bed—your trucks can't fly off."

"Perhaps you're right; I am chock-full of quinine. I'll turn in. Good night."

The "Shunter" did turn in; but he did not sleep, for the Banshee-like screeches of a circular saw some distance away seemed to him an omen of evil.

The "Plumber" went on his way whistling,—he was of a sunny nature, and at last the end seemed in sight. As he neared the low-level bridge, the

sound of the pile-driver in her song of progress greeted his ears. Little did he guess that it was her swan-song she was so cheerfully singing down there in the mist.

## III.

The bridge, slowly creeping forward behind its noisy head, was not the only spot where progress had been made that day. The same sun that dissipated the clinging mist from the river and revealed the bridgers at work, lit up another scene of toil in a village some thirty-five miles away,—of toil less imposing, but no less important in its results. This little deserted village was the "Hornet's nest" or lair of one section of the raiders. Nestling on one side of a low hill, and hidden by others slightly higher all round, the spot was well chosen for its purpose. On each side of the principal street straggled houses, once white but now roofless and blackened. From a cow-shed at one end there issued the sound of hammering, and now and then the hum of a motor engine, driven for short bursts at high speed, rose to a whine. Tarpaulins clumsily stretched on charred rafters and weighted with stones formed the roof of the shed. Never a savoury spot, an odour as of a motor garage now hung about the place, its pungency unpleasantly intensified by the smell of some extinguished acetylene lanterns, for here also they had been working

through the night. Men kept passing in and out of the shed,—they were erecting machinery out in the yard.

In a room of the village inn, still the best house in the place, four officers had just finished a hasty meal and were pushing back their ammunition-box seats from the packing-case table. One of this group was noticeable: very pale, he carried his arm in a sling and had been eating clumsily with his left hand. Another was almost as conspicuous. He was a wiry man with a freckled face and red hair, and he wore a hybrid naval uniform. Upon his yachting cap shone a metal badge representing some insect. The third, the Commandant of the section of raiders, was big and bull-necked, with a sly expression in his protuberant eyes not usually associated with men of his build. All these men were under middle age, but the fourth was the youngest. He had nothing to distinguish him but pink cheeks and a bread-and-butter face; he was attached to the nautical man only, and did not wear the same uniform.

"We can't spread this map in here," said the senior in a guttural voice, lighting his pipe; "let's go into the next room, or, better, into the tap-room, where there's a bar."

Following him, the party filed in on each side of the long counter, the pewter top of which was thick with dust, pieces of plaster, and broken glass. It was a moment's work to sweep this off to add to the wreckage on the floor. The little

run, where some buxom "*patronne*" or "Miss" had formerly reigned, was more than ankle-deep in broken glass and crockery; the shelves behind were bare of their former array of bottles. Behind the shelves, the sharp edges of the slivers of a dusty mirror, radiating outwards from one or two points, caught the light in a prismatic sparkle, the brightness of which accentuated the brutal squalor of the room. Even the smell of dust and plaster had not altogether exorcised the established reek of stale tobacco-smoke and spilt liquor which still hung about.

"Anyway, I am glad to find you here," said the last speaker. "I heard you were on the way, but many expected things do not arrive these days, and I was not too hopeful. And though I must confess that I am even now a bit sceptical about your box of tricks, I am only too keen to try. Have you unpacked your—what do you call them—squadron, fleet, covey, swarm?" The speaker had only just returned from an expedition.

"Yes, sir," somewhat stiffly answered the man in the nautical suit. "They've all been unpacked, and my men are rigging them up in a shed we found. I have twelve—the Gadfly, Wasp, Bee, Mosquito, Tsetse, Ichneum——"

"Steady, steady—I haven't time to listen to the whole entomological dictionary. How many will be ready for this evening — for business, I mean?"

"All—I hope."

"Are your anarchists, engineers, chauffeurs, or skippers prepared to proceed on individual forlorn hopes? Mind you, those who do not blow themselves up or get smashed by a fall, but taken prisoner, will almost certainly be shot as spies, and it's odds that 'good-bye' at starting will be good-bye for ever."

"We quite realise all that, sir, and we'll take our chance. 'Tis a forlorn hope in a way; but the prizes are large. Why, just think, given a chance——"

"Yes, yes, I know. I see you are a cran—I mean, an enthusiast, and quite rightly. Well, I'm going to give you a bellyful of chances!" The other smiled.

"Now, listen. As you are a newcomer, I'll put you in touch with the position in a few words. Never mind if I tell you something you know already, don't interrupt—listen. See square D 14? That's where their Third Army is, some seventy thousand strong. They're in a good position, holding some villages, at a strategic point, the names don't matter. They've been there five days. Our Western force, which is not strong enough to attack, has been hanging on to and harassing them; we cannot make a grand attack, yet we hope to scatter their army and bag much of it. It has marched a long way, fought a lot, and lost nearly all its transport, and it must be starving, quite played out and very short of ammunition, *and*—this is the point—it has only got one

line of rail communication which is cut! The railway's back along here—see?"

The other nodded.

"Of course we cut this line when we retired. In fact, I believe, though I'm not entirely in the confidence of Headquarters, that it was arranged for the enemy to advance here. Naturally they have been doing their best to reopen communication. Being splendid engineers, they've done a lot; but so far they have not succeeded, for no trains have gone up, and only a small waggon convoy or two—a mere trifle. The country all round for miles is a desert as far as supplies go—*we* saw to that—and they must be in a very bad way. We know from spies that they have been for days on reduced rations and have many sick, and their guns are not so busy as they were. My duty, like that of the other raiding parties, for the last five days has been to prevent communication being re-established on the railway. We've cut the line and telegraph—we captured all their wireless gear—till we are sick. The bridges are very strongly guarded, and all the petty damage we can do is repaired almost at once; unluckily it is a double line, and they repair one pair of rails from the other. Altogether our efforts are futile. That's the General Idea. Got all that?" He paused to relight his pipe.

His listener nodded silently.

"Good! Now I don't believe in your new machines flying about vaguely and killing a few men here and there with a bomb, and I think the

Chief must agree, as he has sent you here. I believe in attacking some sore spot, and going back to it again and again. The one place where they are vulnerable is at the big broken bridge—here, one hundred and thirty odd miles from the army. They're working like devils to repair the break, or rather to cross the river by a temporary bridge first, and they are doing it much too quick. They may be through in a day or two, and if so—their Third Army is saved; but if we can delay the repair for three or four days even, I think it is lost! They know all this, and they've made a regular Port Arthur of the bridge-head. We've tried in vain to get near it, but the whole place is surrounded by outposts, barbed wire, and all that, and they have lit up the bridge till it looks like a gin palace. My sapper officer, who destroyed the bridge originally, spent some hours the night before last watching them from a hill, and, thanks to their illuminations, saw a lot. He had three men carrying dynamite with him: one blew himself up, two were captured, and he himself was wounded in the arm. Nothing that *walks* can get near the bridge. That's the Special Idea. Got that?"

Again the other nodded.

"Well, that's the place to attack—that's their sore spot, and here you are—O Beelzebub, Prince of Flies, with your horde! Your duty will be, so long as a single insect remains, to fly to that spot every night and bite or settle or sting, or do what you will to delay the work. Remember, if the

bridge is delayed for three days I expect the Third Army will fall into our mouths like a ripe plum. No food, no ammunition, no horses, they cannot retreat far. Now you have the whole position."

"Yes, quite; but as to the details——"

"My sapper here has a large-scale plan of the place, and knows every inch of it. He will arrange all details with you. He has the very latest information. I'll leave you two. I want some rest."

"Very good, sir."

"Hold on; there is one thing more, and then you will have all my ideas. The aërial attack will be made to-night. Now, how about the news of this reaching the other forces of the enemy?"

"Oh, that seems simple," interposed the youth. "I suppose you'll have every wire cut, and kept cut, so that not a whisper——"

"I thought so. Not so fast, young fellow. I see you are not yet a psychologist, and do not appreciate the 'Moral Factor' in war," he answered, quite pleased at catching the youngster. "The attack takes place to-night, and, whether it succeeds or not, it will certainly cause consternation and alarm at the bridge. I *want* that consternation and alarm to be transmitted to the starving army. I *want* the news of the blasting of their hopes, or even of a mysterious attack, exaggerated by ignorance of its exact nature, to be the last message they receive. Therefore, from daylight till ten to-morrow morning, their wires will not be interfered with; but after that they will be cut,

and kept cut, without chance of repair, and we'll stop all messengers, so that after the final bad news there will be mysterious silence. That will give time for the news to rankle, for rumours to breed, and for the doomed army to exercise its power of imagination: the silence will assist. To men in their position a word of discouragement is worth an army corps to us. Afterwards, if any machines are left unexpended, we might further assist the hunger-bred fantasies of the poor brutes by flying over them and dropping a bomb or two, or even by flying over them and just showing a light. That's all now. I'll leave you to arrange details. *You*" —turning to the youth—"come along and show what your box of tricks is like."

With these words he went out, followed by the youngest officer, who stopped, put his head in at the door, and said, in a whisper of deep admiration, "Perfect devil, ain't he?"

Then followed a long confabulation between the two engineers over the large-scale plan of the bridge, which showed the information gained the previous evening.

"How many, and what size bombs do you carry?" said the man with the wounded arm.

"Four eight-pounders each."

"Well, that's not much good unless you get a detonation alongside some vital spot. It won't do the structure of either bridge itself much harm. Can you drop accurately?"

"If the night is as calm as it is now, we shall be

able to drop one bomb out of two on to a patch a little bigger than this room. If the wind rises it is more difficult, because we have to turn up wind to hover, and the balancing is not so easy. You see, we have to hover anyway to aim, and that's the difficulty. That's what the secret gear and auxiliary-lifting propeller are for—the thing you called the little 'whing-whang,' I mean."

"Quite. Now I know what sort of thing you can do, and this, I think, is the scheme. You see, their rate of work absolutely depends on their pile-driver. If that is destroyed they will have to drive by hand, which will take—oh—five or six times as long. Therefore, that's the sorest point in the sore spot. They're working night and day, partly by the aid of their electric light; if that's destroyed it will hamper them, but will not make them take even twice as long, because they can carry on the low-level bridge with flares. That's the second sorest point. Agree?" "Beelzebub" nodded. "As they're so deuced near finishing, we must try and make a dead cert. of stopping them to-night, as, once their bridge is done, we cannot really damage it with these little bombs. Therefore I think you should sail out with all your fleet, and do your devilmost to-night."

"Yes; that's sound. I quite agree."

"Take on the pile-driver first, and if you get that, or burst its boiler, switch off on to the dynamo-house. That will be a much easier target: it's bigger. If you get only one bomb to burst

inside, even without hitting anything, it will probably wreck the show, for one splinter in the moving parts of the engine or dynamo revolving at high speed will cause the whole thing to fly to bits. Two fair shots should do the trick. Can you count on two bull's-eyes out of forty-eight shots?"

"I think so, if there is no wind. Can't we set anything alight? I'm stocking a splendid line in incendiary bombs, pretty things of petrol and celluloid, that look like capsules?"

"Nothing. I don't know where their ammunition is, though they must have tons there. Hold on,—yes, I saw some mountains of stuff, just here; mark it on the map, will you? That is probably forage. After you have done all you can, and expended all your explosive, sail along and drop a few capsules on to these mounds and over the yard. You may set something alight with any luck. By the way, can you signal to each other?"

"Yes—we carry coloured lights and little lamps in our tails. How about finding our way?"

"I was thinking of that. When you get over the hills about eight miles away from the bridge, you will see the glare of it in the sky and can steer straight for it. To assist you before you spot this glare, we'll send out a dozen men who will have lights on poles, shaded so as to shine upwards. Will that do?"

"Excellent. And about a place for landing, in

case any of us come back,—that's the great difficulty. Have you a pond near here?"

"Yes, about half a mile away. I'll take you to it later."

"That will do. You must put lights to mark the pond, in case it is still dark when we get back, and, if it is deep, have some men with a raft of sorts to haul us out."

"Right."

"Beelzebub" went out to coach his men in the details and finish off the flies. As the other sat still musing, he thought of the feelings of those whose work was going to be so suddenly destroyed, and he had a fellow-feeling of sympathy for them.

. . . . . .

As the day passed the number of curious-looking erections drawn up behind the cow-shed increased. Each was supported by a sort of dwarf bicycle and tied down. They were skeletons, with great flat awnings of membranous material and queer shape stretched taut on light frames stayed with wire. In their spidery appearance they had a remote semblance to reaping-machines. This semblance was borne out by the gaudy fancy of the artist who had painted them, for he had run amuck with his vermilion and blue in a manner usually confined to agricultural machines or toy locomotives. All the metal was painted, and there was no such bright brass or burnished steel about the machinery as might have been expected. Each carried a small

silk national flag at one end, and had its name painted on it.

"Good heavens! what gingerbread-looking things!" was the somewhat tactless remark of the officer commanding raiders, when he first saw them rigged up.

"Shades of Icarus, Lilienthal, Pilcher, and all others! What d'you expect?" retorted the pseudo-naval man, somewhat nettled. "D'you want traction-engines or the winged bulls of Assur-bani-pal?"

It took the foxy one at least five minutes to smooth matters over, and he had to suffer a long technical lecture before he succeeded.

. . . . . .

An hour and a half before the moon went down, the first fly made a start down the sloping road. She was the "flagship," manned by the "admiral." He was seated in his machine, held up by four men.

"All aboard!" he said. "All clear, you?"

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Cast off."

With that the assistants gave the machine a running shove forward, the skipper pedalled, the motor snorted, and the propeller began to revolve. Faster, faster spun the blades as the clumsy machine gained way, until the propeller was nothing but a halo, whose loud hum almost drowned the throbbing of the motor. The Thing

buzzed down the street like a cockchafer, and, when clear of the houses, soared away steadily into the moonlight, shedding its wheels like the skin of a chrysalis. This was repeated successfully eleven times, but when the last machine, manned by the pink-cheeked second officer, should have left its wheels and sailed away into the night, there was a flash, and a violent detonation shook the houses. Fragments rattled back among those watching two hundred yards away.

"There go the bravest men I've ever met," remarked the chief of raiders. As he reached the hole blown in the road, he added—"Poor little chap!" and his voice was even a little more guttural than usual.

## IV.

It was near four in the morning, and all was well when the "Plumber," reaching his post on the bridge once again, made himself snug on a plank resting upon two sacks of fish-bolts. The pile-driver was still thudding monotonously, the steam and the flare-lights still roared, and the water lapped against the timbers, while the mouth-organ whined a hymn-tune a short distance back.

A sudden hiss, and splash into the river, not a pile's length away, fell something. All but simultaneously a column of spray shot up, with the muffled report of an explosion under water, and.

falling backward revealed a heaving blister of mud, just visible through the mist. The men playing dropped their cards and sat up. The whine of the mouth-organ froze in the middle of a bar. But the pile-driver continued its blows, for the fat man still mechanically jerked the string, though his eyes were all but starting out of his head. Silent, stupefied surprise held all. The mud fountain had barely subsided, when—a second hiss and splash close alongside the bridge—and another sub-aqueous explosion followed with its geyser of mud and water, which, falling on the track, would have washed the dazed fat man away but for the string to which he clung. At last the pile-driver stopped. Barely had the soused soldiers got their breath after this douche, when they were shaken by a racking detonation, accompanied by the sound of rending timber, some thirty yards back along the trestles. The air hummed with fragments, while all near the end of the structure lay prostrated by the blast of this shock. Still another detonation followed, this time right among the men, as the bomb struck a sack of bolts. Bodies were thrown right and left amidst a volley of bolts, which shrieked as they spun through the air, dealing death all round. It was worse than any shrapnel-shell, for these missiles were heavy and jagged as potleg, and the force behind them was terrific. The boiler was pierced by one. It burst with a deep roar, capsized the truck, and the whole machine toppled over into the swirl below,

but not before the cloud of steam gushing out had scalded the maimed and helpless men close by. To add to the horror, the wrought-iron reservoir of the flare-light was torn and the flaming oil poured out over the timbers into the water and spread in a blazing film, momentarily lighting up the inferno before it was swept down-stream. The cries of the mangled were loud.

After a minute's respite, a faint crash sounded overhead, succeeded by a burst of yellow light, and two flaming masses fell spinning in a sickening spiral, plumb on to the girder-bridge above, where their flight ended in a volley of explosions against the iron. Again the sound of flying metal filled the air. Other detonations followed in quick succession.

This sudden cataclysm was too much. Men born of women could stand no more. Discipline was lost, and from the river-bed a general wail rose up. Those who had for day and night toiled like slaves, dropped their tools, their work, and fled off the bridges towards shore.

A bouquet of dazzling red stars now burst out on high with a soft liquid report, and slowly floated to earth. In the crimson glow the panic-stricken fugitives paused in terror. What was coming next?

There was not much time to doubt, for a succession of detonations round the corrugated-iron dynamo-shed showed where the attack was falling. These ended in one report with a metallic ring, for

which there was no flash, and the electric light went out as a grinding crash sounded from the shed. A second shower of red stars slowly sank to earth. Then, with many little explosions, fires sprang up in the "yard" away by the station. Most of them soon burned out without doing damage, but the stacks of forage had been touched and burst into a blaze. As the dense clouds of smoke and long tongues of flame mounted up, from overhead a shower of magnesium stars were wafted gently downwards. In their intense light, the flying machines circling round were visible to all those above the mist. The work of destruction ceased.

Rifle-shots rang out, close by at first, then growing into a general fusilade, which became fainter in the distance, like an irregular *feu-de-joie*, towards the farthest outpost line. They marked the course of the angels of destruction, still to be seen in the light of the conflagration. This wild shooting was not quite without result, for two flaming masses were seen to fall—curving towards one of the hills in the north.

As the flames of the burning forage gained strength, and clouds of sparks and a huge volume of lurid smoke rose to the sky—now of the grey hue preceding dawn,—the roar and crackle of the conflagration drowned all other sounds.

. . . . . .

Against the glowing embers, the half-dressed figure of the consumptive railway traffic officer

might have been observed gazing helpless at the scene—the realisation of his fears. He was not thinking of his yard, of his friend the "Plumber," or of the horrors around him. He was dreaming of the fate of an army, and of the ultimate results of its destruction.

## V.

A solitary man stood by a hedge. In his hand was a charred pole, on top of which a light, screened from below, was burning feebly. Close by a hobbled horse cropped the scant grass. No other sound broke the stillness of the night as the man gazed steadily upwards. The moon had sunk and the stars were growing pale in the grey of false dawn, when the horse threw up his head and snorted. The man gave no sign. A moment afterwards he heard a faint rustle in the sky as of flighting geese. Ghostly in the mysterious light a shape loomed up overhead and swept past on a long slant. Seven times this happened in quick succession. To the weary eyes of the watcher the shapes seemed to be travelling in long swoops—now up, now down—and slower than when they had passed him on their outward journey.

For the others that he had seen go out he waited,—waited till the hills to the east stood out purple against the blushing sky,—but waited in vain.

# Cuvée Reservée; or, The Widow's Cruse.

"And lately, by the Tavern Door agape,
Came shining through the Dusk an Angel Shape
Bearing a Vessel on his Shoulder; and
He bid me taste of it; and 'twas—the Grape!"
—*The Rubáiyát.*

THE sentry leaned over the bridge and hissed between his teeth. A man standing underneath, attired in nothing but a grey shirt, looked up.

"Jest tell the corporal of the guard to come up here a minute, will you?"

"Carn't *you* do it? Me feet are bare, old son," was the protest.

"No; I don't want to whistle, and I've got me eye on something."

The semi-nude one picked his way grumbling along the rock, among scraps of iron and stones, and disappeared behind the nearest pier. The sentry shaded his eyes with his bandaged hand and again stood at gaze, looking steadily towards the south.

The day was brilliant with true South African

brilliancy, and the scene was one of cheerfulness almost amounting to gaiety. From the soft blue of the sky and the deeper blue and violet of the fantastically shaped hills all round—which looked as if they had been cut out of tin, so well defined were their edges in the clear atmosphere—right across the intervening stretch of yellow veldt and green bush to the river, was one giant pattern of subdued colour. The air had been cleared by the slight local shower which had fallen during the night, and heavy storms towards Basutoland had swollen the spruit and converted the chain of almost stagnant pools of the day before into the eight-foot torrent which was now flowing—as befitted a tributary of the mighty Orange—red and turgid. At the point where the bridge crossed it, the stream curved in a horseshoe bend to the south. On the south bank, on the outside of the curve, the flood had reached the soil and was fretting it away in great lumps, which fell periodically and with sudden splash; on the other side, the water lapped over the slope of sheet rock, picking up pieces of paper, straw, and the thousand and one oddments of a camp and workshop, which danced about merrily till they were drawn into the current and whisked downstream. In the shade underneath the undamaged part of the bridge, where the rock was still uncovered, heaps of wood-shavings and scrap-iron showed what had been the carpenter's and smith's shops during the reconstruction. At these spots

the word "TIMMERWINKEL" and "SMEDERIJ" had been painted in foot-high letters on the smooth rock by some wag of the erstwhile workers possessed of a knowledge of the official language across the border. On the pier itself, where there was no trace of bar or even liquor store, the words "GOED KOOP WINKEL—WHO SAYS A COOLER?" in emerald green, bore witness that the artist possessed the gentle gift of satire as well as that of tongues.

The detachment, the tents of whose camp could be seen close by on the north, had just come to this spot in order to guard a recently repaired railway bridge not far from the border of Cape Colony; but beyond the stacked rifles underneath and the armed sentry on top, there were no conspicuous signs of war. The little force, including officers,—all, in fact, except the guard,—were taking advantage of the God-sent water. It was an opportunity not to be missed. Some, like boys, were wallowing about in the flood with merry din and splashing; others were squatting at the water's edge, busy beating out their "grey-back" shirts on the stones.

The sentry stood on top of the end girder, where the old bridge ended and the trestles began. It was the highest point above the veldt for some three miles, and had the disadvantage of conspicuousness; but this was not of much importance, for the bridge itself was visible above the surrounding bushes for many

hundreds of yards. It needed no figure in khaki standing on top to announce the presence of a British force.

Brightly as the whole scene was coloured, its brilliance seemed to culminate at the sentry. Near his feet the dull chocolate hue of the iron-work was relieved by the gaudy colour of a freshly riveted patch, which glistened in its recent coat of red-lead. Across this his shadow fell—a purple bar. There was nothing brilliant about the faded khaki of the uniform or the tanned face; but the blue of the sky was out-rivalled by that of the bandage on his left hand. Many a squalid scene in South Africa indeed owed its only relief—in an artistic sense—to the universal veldt-sore and its alembroth-gauze dressing. Yes, the sentry was the centre of the colour scheme; but he was not the centre of interest, to himself at least, for he continued to peer towards the south with a perturbed expression.

Very soon another soldier hurried across the bridge, each step ringing out on the iron slats of the narrow four-foot way. Climbing up alongside the watcher, and incautiously placing his hands on the half-dried paint, he arrived at the top with smeared uniform and vermilion palms, and around him the atmosphere of gaiety and peace was instantaneously dissipated! He finally concluded by addressing the sentry.

"Well, what is it now? Some more blarsted ostriches?"

"No," replied the soldier, who seemed sensitive on the point, in a ruffled tone, "it ain't. It's mounted men and waggons or guns. See that flat kopje? Well, under the hump at the end, jest to the left of the—one—two—three—fourth telegraph post."

"By gum! y're right; it ain't birds this time. That's a big cloud of dust. There's a crowd of men under that, I lay."

There was indeed at the point indicated a thick column of yellow dust which gleamed in the sunlight: the rain of the night before had been slight. At this range the watchers could not know that, caught under the last waggon of the approaching force, where the escort did not notice it, was a dead bush. Nothing better calculated to exaggerate the size of a force seen from afar than this improvised broom could have been devised. At a distance the result might have made even a brigadier pause and think!

It must be explained that these events occurred at a kaleidoscopic period of the war when no post knew what to expect. At one hour a solitary rider or a convoy of remounts, practically without escort, might appear; the next it might be a prowling commando. The detachment at the river was one of the Thaba 'Nchu Thrusters, an irregular unit in which things were done first

and reported—or not—afterwards. Very, very rarely did matters take the officially proper channel, usually a tortuous one, badly buoyed and lighted even for the regular.

In this case the corporal did not call a sergeant for his opinion, and no sergeant, after inspection, called upon an officer for his. The N.C.O. on the spot was satisfied that a large force was approaching, arms and the men were close at hand, and the captain had only recently lectured them on the importance of accepting responsibility and not taking chances. It was enough.

"Let her go, Gallagher!" he muttered, and, placing his first and little finger between his lips, he gave a "butcher's whistle" three times.

The effect was electrical. Within a minute Michael Angelo's celebrated cartoon of soldiers surprised while bathing was reproduced with up-to-date effects. There was a shouting, splashing, and scurry, a hasty scramble for shirts, boots, and bandoliers, then a mob of men, some nude, many bootless, but all armed, ran to their various alarm posts. All knew their positions, and within three minutes there was hardly a man visible except those on the bridge.

The Commandant and the second-in-command, the latter with a lathered chin, rushed coatless from a tent and joined the little group on the top of the bridge, now augmented by the addition of a corpulent sergeant. With the precipitancy of youth—they were subalterns—the

officers scrambled up quickly. It was not until they had both placed their hands well on to the red-lead patch that the sergeant turned round and thoughtfully remarked—

"Beg pardon, sir—that's wet paint there."

Once again there was some little unpleasantness on that girder-top. When things had quieted down a bit, it was, according to the custom of the Service, the sergeant and not the corporal, nor of course the private, who proceeded to explain the cause of alarm. Unfortunately for formality, besides having begun badly, the sergeant had not himself had time to discover exactly where the danger lay. Thus, vagueness in facts was added to nervousness in demeanour.

Throwing routine overboard, the Commandant —one Lieutenant Wolfe—cut him short and asked generally—

"Come, come. Who's seen what and where?"

Like one man, corporal and sentry started off to elucidate the situation; but the former's tone caused the private to drop out of the race and leave the last word with his senior. Glasses were brought to bear on the dust-cloud, now strangely shrunk in size.

"Umph!" said Wolfe after a steady stare. "That's only a waggon or two, and I never saw burghers, even a commando, come along a track with all that song and dance."

"No more Boers than we are," curtly echoed the second-in-command, Lieutenant John Orle,

as he put down his glasses. Being called out for nothing in the middle of a shave does not lead to unnecessary suavity.

Without more ado Wolfe pulled out a whistle and blew loudly. Like so many meerkats half a hundred men popped up in all directions and turned towards the bridge. "Carry on," he shouted, waving his arm; and the garrison left their lairs, and, with many scowls at the sentry, proceeded back to stack arms. The Commandant turned to the man who had caused the trouble—

"What the deuce d'you mean, Corporal Dockery? I don't call that *much* dust."

"Well, sir, the Captain said we were to take no chances, an' me an' Riley here thought it was a large body. There don't seem to be so much dust now, but two minutes ago there was quite a lot. Riley saw it as well as me." There was now more hesitation in coming forward on the corporal's part than there had been. He appeared to rely somewhat on the junior for corroboration.

"Yes," replied that luckless man eagerly, thus drawing fire on himself, "it ain't nothing now to what it was."

"Oh, rats!" was the unsympathetic reply. "You were not born yesterday, and you know as well as I do that Boers don't show themselves like that. You won't be popular if you play this game often, and I daresay we'll be having some men touched up by the sun after this damfool business," and the speaker looked wrath-

fully at his hands as if for signs of the disease. The sergeant and corporal had both gradually edged away into the background during this speech, and, for whomsoever the reproof was intended, it was the sentry who got it.

Wolfe turned to the white-chinned Orle. "I'll go out and meet them and see who they are." With that he strolled across the trestles and out over the veldt, and the garrison resumed its interrupted ablutions. The loss, in the hasty assembly, of some of their few priceless pieces of soap considerably increased the general annoyance. There was no reticence about its expression, which was quite audible and not comforting to the aggrieved watcher now again alone on high. *He* had got all the blame, but after all it was the Non-Com. who had sounded the alarm. Besides, it had been a big cloud—a very big cloud—much more than a waggon or two could make. 'Twas in vain that he puzzled over the inexplicable change. How was he to tell that a large bush had suddenly dropped from underneath a vehicle of the approaching force?

It was not long before Wolfe returned with the strange party. It consisted of one subaltern and four men of the "A.E.S.R.," or All England Seaside Rifles, with two waggons. The men were on the waggons; the officer was riding. He was a nice-looking youngster, by name Stanley Simkin, but was not at all the type usually associated with the real-business-and-no-dam-swagger-and-that-

sort-of-rot volunteer soldier. He was beautifully dressed and wonderfully equipped, all his gear being as fresh as himself, and his pink complexion, smooth hair and eyeglass were suggestive of a stage Guardsman. He was on his way northwards *vid* Grampian's Pont, conveying stores up to regimental headquarters.

"No, I am afraid this is no good," Wolfe was saying as they came up, speaking of the drift close to the bridge; "there must be a good six feet of water over it now. You'd better doss down here for the night; these floods go down as quickly as they rise, and if it stops raining away up in Basutoland, you will be able to cross to-morrow."

"Thanks, awfully good of you, but I must reach the Pont as early as possible. Isn't there some other ford, I mean drift, anywhere within a reasonable distance?"

"Oh yes, there's Valk Drift about four miles away. It's a toss up whether that will be passable either; but the spruit is broader there, and I daresay it may be. If you think it's worth chancing, have a bite with us, and I'll ride out with you afterwards. We can pick up a Dutch farmer on the way who will guide us across the drift. I don't know it well, and it's crooked and not properly marked."

Simkin was profuse in thanks. The mules were outspanned, and officer and men came across to enjoy the hospitality of the irregulars for lunch. During this simple meal, at which the last tin of

asparagus was broached in his honour, the guest's rather stiff manner thawed, and he gave his hosts a great deal of interesting information about his regiment, relating how the various corporate bodies of the watering-places of England had competed to fit it out with every conceivable and inconceivable luxury. Perhaps he was a bit full of "Ours," but it was natural, and not a bad trait in a young officer. In their jealousy Wolfe and Orle seriously discussed the advisability of resigning their appointments in their own rough-and-ready corps and travelling home to join the All Englands. They also gave Simkin many "facts" about South Africa,—its climate, customs, flora and fauna, and especially about the ways of Brother Boer. Though British born, they had been in the country for many years, quite long enough to teach the brand-new, open-eyed Simkin a thing or two, and his arrival only afforded pleasant and healthy exercise for the imaginative powers. He did not make a hearty meal, the "bully" and the flies were too much for him as yet, and after smoking some of his excellent cigars the little party set off to the west, taking the farm of one Koos Van der Merwe —a worthy and now painfully loyal Dutchman— on the way, in order to obtain his services as guide. Simkin quite expanded under the genial influence of the swashbuckler; and it was in cheery conversation that the tedium of the road was enlivened, for Wolfe was a light-hearted fellow, and made the most of all chances of enjoyment. The

volunteer asked many questions about the enemy, and seemed to be extremely pugnacious. They found the farmer at home and quite willing to guide, and it was not long before they were standing on the north side of the swollen river. Here they halted a minute, in order to give the dripping mules a rest and to have a last word.

"So long! When the spruit is full already, it is not easy, Captain. Maar alles zal recht kom, eh?" said the bearded guide, turning to Simkin.

"No, by Jove! You guided us top hole." The expression somewhat puzzled Koos, but coming of a race not easily abashed, he was in no way put off his stroke.

"You have some coffee, perhaps, eh? My wife, she tell me to ask the Captain." The volunteer was now puzzled: not knowing of the dearth of coffee in many farms in the north of Cape Colony at that time, he imagined that this was a well-meant but somewhat belated invitation on the part of Mrs Van der Merwe.

"*So* sorry; 'fraid I can't—must be gettin' on. Please thank your wife, though: it's awf'lly good of her."

The cadging and once more mystified Dutchman grinned idiotically and scratched his ear. Wolfe, who was greatly enjoying all this—what he would have called Blind Man's Buff—was about to explain Van der Merwe's meaning when Simkin broke in tentatively, as if fearful of giving offence: "I say, don't you think we might celebrate the

occasion,—crossing of the Rubicon and all that sort of thing—eh, what?"

"Most appropriate," said Wolfe promptly. "I'm sure old man Koosie looks as if he could lap down something and agrees with the Governor of North Carolina, and who am I—to say nay? *You* know how a detachment mess is always treated."

This service platitude was indeed a *coup de Jarnac*, for though the irregular's knowledge only extended to one detachment mess, the volunteer had no knowledge, and the imputation of experience was pleasing.

"*Rather*," he said, and went up to a waggon.

After fumbling under the tarpaulin he produced a straw case, and in a matter-of-fact way drew out from it a champagne bottle. Wolfe's heart leaped; but he had so often drunk whisky poured from champagne bottles, pickle bottles—once even from a blacking bottle—that the palpitation was only temporary. When, however, he saw the unbroken gold foil and read on the visible half of the label

DEC 18— VEUVE CLICQUOT— REIMS

he coughed and rubbed his eyes. Meanwhile his host had produced three mugs, and was calmly manipulating the wire. When he had handed round the wine he removed his eyeglass, polished it with a silk handkerchief, and smiled.

"It's all right, I think—perhaps a trifle dry,

but *quite* a good brand—eh, what?" There was no answer. Both his listeners were too astonished for words. He went on, "Your health! I am extremely obliged to both of you," and bowed in courtly fashion to his two guides.

"Ch-cheero!" stammered Wolfe, when he had recovered himself, with that indescribable twist of the head which indicates a desire for another man's prosperity.

"Gezondheit! Alles ten beste!" said the Dutchman.

"Would you care to take a bottle to Orle, and you one to your wife?" was the next thing that shook the still dazed Wolfe.

"Eh?" he replied.

"Wouldn't you like a bottle for your mess?"

"Take one with me? Yes!"

Wonders did not cease: some more fumbling and Simkin calmly produced two more straw cases, which he handed over. Quite forgetting to thank him, Wolfe simply stared at the waggon.

"I say," he remarked at length gravely.

"Yes."

"Have you got a waggonful of Bubbly there?"

"Well, not quite full. It's a present to the regiment from the mayors and corporations of the watering-places of England."

The irregular smiled; but he was badly shaken, and the smile was a veneer which did not hide the wistful regret underneath.

"Yes," drawled Simkin, lighting a cigarette,

"and I've had to wait to bring it up. Awful noosance stopping behind for this, don't cherknow, when all the other fellows are at 'the Front.'" He pronounced the last words as if printed in inverted commas, just as he had seen them below hundreds of portraits in picture papers—A Hero "At the Front," The Wife of a "H.a.t.F.," The Little Son of a "H.a.t.F.," The Boots of a "H.a.t.F.," and so forth.

"Yaas, of course," said Wolfe. "It must be." *He* had had plenty of the fly-blown front for some time. He went on:

"It's awfully jolly up there. Why not go up by mail train yourself, old man? You may be cut out of some big thing by hanging round here with these rotten stores. *You* go up. Leave the stuff with me and I'll send it along in a truck after you. The R.S.O. at Grampians is a pal of mine, and I can get a truck very quickly."

Wolfe could not tell whether Simkin's expression was one of pure fatuity or cunning as he said, "Thanks awfully, but I've got orders to bring it up by road myself and not to lose sight of it. Must obey orders, you know."

"Of course, of course, if that's the case," said Wolfe. "Nothing more doing here *yet*," was his thought as he rose.

"Good-bye, and good luck. It's not a very difficult track to Grampians, but it winds about a good bit and is overgrown now."

Koos and he carefully picked up their prizes.

As the pair slowly reforded the river, Simkin gave the word to trek, and with many shouts from the Kaffir drivers the convoy moved northwards.

On his way back Wolfe was assailed by temptation. He thought of making Van der Merwe stand and deliver his ill-gained loot. What did a Dutch farmer know even of gooseberry? And this was Veuve Clicquot of a special year. It would be wasted on him and his ample vrou: they would far prefer coffee. But the soldier's better instincts prevailed, and a feeling of *noblesse oblige*, which he himself would have called "cricket," prevented the dastardly act contemplated. Both rode on in silence, marvelling at the lunacy of a man who not only wandered about the veldt with a waggon-load of liquor, but let people know of it. At the parting of their ways the Dutchman turned off towards his farm, and Wolfe galloped to camp cursing the fate which had allowed him to assist in getting that waggon across the river before he knew what was in it. Arrived in camp, he walked straight up to the stuffy mess tent, outside which Orle was sitting.

"Hullo! Why this hurrah-face? Struck an outcrop?" was the latter's greeting.

Keeping one hand behind his back, Wolfe stalked slowly up to the plank on two barrels which formed the mess table before he replied. "Aha! So long—already! You vait one meenit!" He took his hat off and spun it round on his finger. Had Orle not known his senior's light-hearted ways, he

might have been perturbed. Wolfe continued: "Vait one leetle meenit: you vatch dis hat—hein? Vot you like? I pull for you a life rhabbit or some echte golddfisch—I call 'im Minnie—I call 'im Charrlie—Boom!"

While his puzzled audience blankly stared at the spinning hat, Wolfe quickly placed his burden on the table, and, whipping off the straw cover, struck the true conjuring attitude. "See vot I gif you! Vot you tink? Hein? Der is no decebtion, ladies and shentlemens! Rah, Rah!"

Orle watched, silent.

"*You*, my well-beloved and trusty lootenant, go out foraging and bring back a brace of koorhahn or a measly sprenghaas. I produce a bottle of Bubbly, allwoolla, top-hole brand too, and none of your just-as-goods!"

Now the secret was out. There was no question, no unnecessary curiosity. Fetching a tin-opener and two mugs, Orle silently opened the bottle. In half a minute the two Thrusters were regarding each other over the brims of their mugs and wagging their heads with the usual formula.

"Here's to our guest! Bless him," added Wolfe.

"Now," said Orle, wiping his moustache, "tell us all about it. Who've you been robbing? Not our petted Percy?"

"Jack," replied the other with a sigh of content, "that fellow of the All Englands may be a petted, kid-gloved, glass-house Percy, but he's a white man

and a peach, and has a perfect action in dealing drinks."

"Did *he* give you this?"

"Yes; and not only this, young feller-me-lad, but he gave Koos Van der Merwe another, and we cracked one on the spot after getting across!"

"Three?"

"Yes. The little brute, if you please, has a waggon full up to the gunwale of it——" He was interrupted by an exclamation from Orle, but continued. "I know what you are thinking. I've been kicking myself all the way home, too. If we had only known——! But there it is—he's across now. It'll take him some time to reach the Pont, though, and he's not out of reach yet if Grafter and Davey drop in this afternoon, as they said they would. We must fix up something with them. It would be a crime to let him go past our fellows with all this stuff. He's dying to chuck it away, and will only waste it on those greedy brutes farther on. They'll be round him like flies. Whatever happens, you bet his mess will never see much of it."

"But tell us all about it."

"Well, we picked up old man Koos all right. He was at home and only too keen to oblige. When we got across, of course the slim old verneuker starts his usual song and tries to cadge coffee for the missus,—thought he'd a soft thing on; but he was properly scored off, because——" There was a sound of hoofs, and the speaker

jumped up, exclaiming, "Here they come—Grafter and Davey," as two fresh officers cantered up.

"Hello!" was the shout of the foremost as he saw the table. "What have we here? Tea in a gooseberry bottle or a drop of the real stuff? All to yourselves, in the afternoon too! What'cher been up to? Railway accident, hospital train smashed up—salvage—willing helpers lend a hand—eh?"

"Let 'em all come," said Wolfe, lifting up the bottle and examining it; "there's just a toothful left for each of you. It's no gooseberry, my sons; look at this," and he pointed to the label, while Orle produced a cracked tumbler and a tea-cup.

"Now, you two," said Wolfe, "if you want a drop more of the same dog, just listen. Let ons maak a plaan." They listened. "There is an almighty fool—no, he's a dear boy really—who is now trekking with two mule waggons and four or five men from Valk to the Pont. He left the drift about three o'clock and his mules have been going since morning, so you can figure out his pace for yourselves. The point is that one of his waggons is bang-full of champagne!"

"Ikona!" came as one word from the two newcomers.

"Fact; present from home, if you please, for the regimental mess—'All Englands.' But never mind that: he's got the stuff," Wolfe slapped the bottle conclusively. "And he seems inclined to throw it

about. Van der Merwe and I guided him over the drift, and we scoffed a quart on the spot and each brought a bottle away with us."

"Didn't Van der Merwe—er—lend—you his?" suggested Grafter with meaning.

"No, no; I draw the line somewhere. Now, it's a pity to waste what Providence has put in our way, and we mustn't let those other brutes up north get it all. Orle and I can do no more now—we have done our bit; but there are lots of us between this and Grampians. That's the size of the situation, and I leave it to you. You can run it your own way; but I advise you to ride after him, ask him where he is going, play the Samaritan, tell him he's gone astray, take him round a bit, and put him back on the same road. And if you don't each get a bottle, I'll eat my hat!"

No more was necessary. The "Samaritans" were already mounting. One leaned forward to Wolfe—

"See here, old son. What's wrong with holding him up? Ambush the lot, shoot a mule or two from cover, and then Davey and me ride up in the nick of time, having driven off the enemy?"

"No, I wouldn't; dangerous. He's got some men; they're all armed, and little Percy is all right—only he doesn't know who to watch. If he thought it was 'hostilities,' he'd hoist half a dozen Union Jacks and fight to the bitter end, and some one might be killed or wounded. No, no, it won't do; it's gently that does the trick. Afterwards

you can pass the good news on to Batley and the others."

"How about the waggon breaking down?"

"Can't be done in daylight with four men round it. Besides, that'll be a last resource when he gets fed up with giving away quarts of fizz to friendly guides. You'd better do as I say, but I don't care a darn how you do it: there it is, take it or leave it, only don't kill anybody, and if you get an extra bottle or two somehow, think of me and Jack here. Get a move on. The sooner you work it the more chance for the next lot."

"You're a beauty; thanks. Good-bye. Good-bye, Jack. Come on, Dave," and the two cantered off northwards side by side in deep consultation. Wolfe and Orle chuckled as they watched them out of sight, then turned to their duties, which, though not heavy, were extremely monotonous when nothing happened. Their little excitement was over, but the bright sun which shone on the bridge guard was also shining on a small convoy now some miles away, and upon two brigands pricking o'er the plain towards it in a small cloud of dust.

. . . . . .

Some six days later Lieutenant Wolfe had cause to go by train to Grampian's Pont. He arrived towards evening, when the station was crowded. The train which had brought him drew up in a siding some distance from the platform, and he got down on to the ground. On the main line along-

side was another train just about to start for the north. As he strode along the row of trucks he saw an officer trying to climb into one with some difficulty. It was not an unusual occurrence, but something familiar in the man's appearance at once attracted the Thruster's eye. Upon a second glance he saw that this officer, though looking a little older, much dirtier, and more in keeping with his background than at the time of their last meeting, was no other than Lieutenant Simkin of the All Englands. Evidently much hampered by a straw bundle that he was carefully hugging under his arm, he only succeeded in getting aboard as Wolfe got abreast of him. The engine whistled. Wolfe jumped up with one foot on the axle-box and held on to the side.

"Hello, old chap! you still here, and railing up! What's happened to your convoy?"

Simkin, besides looking decidedly the worse for wear, seemed too depressed to show much surprise or any cordiality at his friend's reappearance. "Yes, it's me. Had the devil's own time since we last met. Lost my way several times, had several—almost too many—kind friends to put me straight though, but when I got near this infernal den of thieves everything went wrong." The train began to move with a series of jolts, which, as they reached Simkin's truck, almost threw down the redoubtable Wolfe. "Waggons kept on breaking down; mules went lame, strayed, fell sick; lost

nearly all my stuff, so I dumped the remainder on the rail, and here I am. Had enough trekking."

The train was gathering speed, and Wolfe had to drop off and run. Though surprised and breathless, yet like the good officer he was, he did not get confused or lose his head. He went straight for the—to him—strategic point.

"Good Lord! lost all that Bubbly?" he panted.

"Oh no," said the "Peach," raising his voice as Wolfe fell behind in the race. "Not all; I've got *this!*" and taking the straw case from under his arm he withdrew a fat bottle with sloping shoulders and gold top, which he triumphantly brandished.

Wolfe waved a farewell and stopped running. The train rumbled on into the gloom.

Thoughtfully he picked his way behind it towards the station, muttering, "Well, that beats the band—all gone! Some of these irregular corps are simply hogs. Just my luck! Five minutes earlier and I'd told him that he was in the wrong end of the train, shoved him into another truck, and then——" There came back to him a scene of a river in flood. Above the swirl of water he heard the snapping of wire, the pop of a cork, and the words, "Perhaps a trifle dry, but *quite* a good brand—eh, what?"

# Mole-Warfare.

## I.

At last, after days of work, the excavation has been done. The actual tunnel,—the mine-gallery—is but a replica, life-size, of the mine-chart kept with such precautions and jealous care by the Lieutenant-Colonel of Engineers, in his little straw shanty down in the lodgement whence the gallery started. This chart is plotted out on a large-scale parchment map of the fort in front, dog's-eared and dirty because it was made by a Japanese Engineer officer, when working before the war as a coolie on this very defence work.

Degree for degree, foot for foot, with the help of theodolite, level, and plumb-bob, has the gallery followed its miniature prototype on the greasy parchment. If plumb-bob and measure, level and theodolite have not lied, the desired point underneath the main parapet of Fort ——shan has now been reached.

The chambers excavated at right angles to contain the explosive were cut, as soon as the main gallery was estimated to have crossed below the

deep ditch and to be well beneath the great parapet of the fort, the object to be blown up.

Into these chambers tons and tons of dynamite have been carefully carried and closely packed. The men who stood for hours along the gallery passing the cases from one to the other like water-buckets at a fire have now trooped out; the means of firing the charge have been put into position and connected; the charge is sealed up by the mass of rock, shale, and earth which has been placed for some fifty yards back in the gallery as "tamping"; the ceaseless scurry to and fro of the mining trucks — those little trucks which have run forwards empty and back again full, their badly greased wheels often shrieking a horror-struck protest at their task—has ended; and the mole-like miners have come up from underground. After days of burrowing they are now entirely brown, clothes, hands, faces, and hair full of crumbs of soil.

As usual no chances have been taken. As far as possible, the means of firing the charge have in every case been duplicated. Firstly, there is electricity. For this there are two entirely separate circuits, each connected to its own set of detonators in the charge and, to prevent possible damage from clumsy foot or falling stone, the wires have been carried in split bamboos along the gallery. The circuits have been tested several times, and each time the little kick of the galvanometer-needle has shown that there was no break in the line. Besides the electricity there is the ordinary fuze, also in

duplicate. Each is made up of three different links in the chain of ignition: the detonators in the charge, the length of instantaneous-fuze from them to a point some yards outside the tamping, and lastly the short piece of slow burning safety-fuze joined on in order to allow time for escape to the person igniting the charge. Weak spots in the train of fire are these joints, difficult to make and easily deranged by a jerk or a falling stone. The fuzes, however, are after all only a second string; much neater, cleaner, quicker and more certain is the electric current.

Far away, at varying distances, are the guns, every one already laid on the doomed fort. Some will fire direct, others from behind hills, whence the target cannot be seen; but as soon as the smoke of the explosion shoots up and spreads mushroom-like into the sky, all will concentrate their fire on this work. Under cover of this squall of bursting steel and shrapnel bullets will the assaulting columns storm the breach. The stormers are now crouching under cover in the different lodgements and parallels closest to the work. They are waiting the moment to charge forward on the bewildered and shaken survivors of the explosion, who will at the same time be subjected to this inferno of artillery fire.

All is ready, but not a moment too soon, for have not the listeners, lying prone in their branch listening-galleries, heard coming from somewhere in the womb of Mother Earth the strokes of the

Russians countermining? Has not the pebble placed on the many-coloured captured Russian drum danced to the same vibrations? Hard it is to locate, harder still to estimate their distance; but without doubt they are working, working near at hand too. Even now they may have burrowed right up to the charge, and be busy cutting the electric leads and fuzes. Dynamite, luckily, cannot be drowned out by water.

Down the hillside is the lodgement, that hole which looks like a distorted volcanic crater. Such, in fact, it is, being the result of exploding a few small mines, so spaced that their resulting craters intersect and by overlapping form one elongated pit, a broad and very deep trench. The soil vomited up by the explosions has formed a parapet all round as it fell back. It was when the attackers found that they could advance no closer over the open, that this pit was made. A tunnel had been made up to its position,—this was the commencement of the mole's work,—and the mines exploded. At once, even while the sky was still raining rocks and clods of earth, the sappers and infantry advanced with a cat-like rush from the parallel behind and seized this point of vantage. Without delay they started with pick and shovel to improve on the work of the explosives. Cat-like too, with tooth and nail have they hung on to their newly won position against all counter-attacks. In vain have the desperate Russians surpassed themselves in their nightly attempts to try and turn them

out with bayonet, bomb, or bullet. A foothold once established, the men of Nippon have hung on to the spot, steadily strengthening it the while.

From this lodgement was started the gallery for the great mine that is just about to be exploded and to give them a road into the fortress, and it is here that all interest is now centred.

Down at the bottom of the hollow is a small group intently waiting. At the telephone in the straw shanty kneels the operator. Over the top of the parapet, above which bullets and shells sing their way, peers the Lieutenant-Colonel. Close by, in charge of a heavily-built sergeant, lies a curious innocent-looking box with a handle; it is the dynamo-exploder. Near it two men are standing, each holding one end of an electric wire in either hand. The ends of these wires, where the metal protrudes from its black insulation, is scraped bright.

The telephone orderly speaks; the Colonel gives an order. Quickly and silently the two ends of wire held by one man are placed in the clamps of the dynamo, which are screwed down to grip them. The moment is fateful, and dead silence reigns among the little group, whose drawn and dirty faces wear if possible a more anxious expression than usual. The orderly speaks again. The Colonel turns to the sergeant,—"Fire!"

The latter throws his whole weight on the handle, forcing it down with a purring rattle,

while all involuntarily cower down, holding their breath. . . .

Nothing happens!

Again,—once more is the handle jerked up and forced down. Nothing happens! The man holding the second circuit steps forward, and the exploder is quickly connected to it. Once, twice, three times does the handle rattle as it is forced down, by two men now.

Again,—nothing!

"Who connected this charge?"

Captain Yamatogo of the Imperial Japanese Engineers steps forward and salutes; a small, thin man, so coated with dried sweat and earth that he might again be well taken for the coolie. He is responsible: he was in charge; but, he happens to be the one chosen among many volunteers to go down and light the fuze, if necessary, and to go down and relight it, should it not act the first time. The matter of the failure of the electricity can wait till later. A word, and he turns round, picks up a small portable electric lamp which he straps round his forehead, and slings a thick coil of safety-fuze over his shoulder. A salute, and he has gone down the gallery, picking his way carefully. There is for the moment no danger, for no fuze has been lit and none can therefore smoulder to flame up again suddenly.

As he strides along, his thoughts run over the possible causes of failure. He ponders over a dull boom which he fancied he had heard proceed from

the direction of the tunnel some five minutes ago, just before they connected with the dynamo. No one else had noticed it, apparently, amid the storm of noise. He had decided that his ears must be playing him tricks, for he had done much underground listening recently; but now, down there alone, his thoughts again revert to this sound.

After walking for some two minutes, he almost stumbles into an obstruction; the left side of the gallery and the top have apparently fallen in. It is in a soft portion of the tunnel lined with timbers, which are splintered and lying about. He hastily searches the side walls for a gauge mark showing the distance from the mouth. He finds one; he is twenty yards short of the tamping, and therefore the pile of soil and rock is just over the ends of the safety-fuze. Whilst standing there he hears strokes and voices, — voices close to him. He half draws his sword and waits.

This explains the failure. His ears were right. The enemy have driven forward a tube and exploded a small counter-mine, smashing in the side of the gallery. Well, they seem to have succeeded in spoiling the attackers' plan, for the present at any rate. It will be impossible to dig these tons of earth off the fuzes under some hours; the gallery is completely blocked. But stay,—is it? He sees a small patch of darkness on the right-hand top corner of the mound. Scrambling up, he digs with his hands, and finds a mere crust of earth. Behind this the

opening is just large enough to crawl through. He wriggles along on his belly between the earth and the roof for some ten yards, then the mound slopes away and he stumbles down on to the floor again in the small space between the obstruction and the tamping at the end of the tunnel. He darts to the side of the tunnel and picks up two red ropes. These are the instantaneous-fuzes. Captain Yamatogo knows all that is to be known about fuzes; he knows well that to light the instantaneous means death, as the flame would flash straight down to the charge before he could move. Not wanting to die uselessly, he heaves at the fuzes to try and pull them and the pieces of safety-fuze joined to their ends from under the load of earth. He pulls, but they do not yield; dropping them, he whips out his knife. He will cut the instantaneous and splice on to it a longish piece of safety, long enough to allow him to get back over the obstruction after lighting. Two minutes' work will do it.

At that moment he again hears a voice, still closer than before. There is no time to lose, not even two minutes; the words are Russian. Quickly he makes up his mind, but, his resolve taken, he proceeds calmly. Taking out a little Japanese flag, he sticks it into the earth beside him, squats down on his heels, peels the end of the cut fuze, and takes out a cigarette. As he does this, he cannot help recalling with a grim smile that it must be just above where he now squats that he was kicked when working as a coolie, by a Russian officer. He

then thinks of his wife at home near Osaka, and his two merry-eyed little boys.

He lights the cigarette and takes a long pull. Expelling the smoke with a hoarse cry of *Banzai*, he presses the end of the fuze hard on to the glowing cigarette end. There is a hiss and a jet of sparks.

* * * * * *

To those watching, great Fujiyama itself seems to erupt skywards from the Fort of ——shan. Within two minutes the men of his company are running and stumbling above what was once Captain Yamatogo of the Imperial Japanese Engineers.

## II.

On the top of yonder hill is the Abomination of Desolation.

Inside what was the fort, the surface of rock and of earth, on level and on slope, is gashed and pitted into mounds and holes, the craters of the exploding eleven-inch shells. These monstrous projectiles have rained on the place until the defenders must have felt like the doomed dwellers in the Cities of the Plain.

Down below, where surfaces of broken concrete appear in patches of grey among the rock, were once the mouths of the bomb-proof casemates wherein the tortured garrison sought refuge from the hail of falling steel, vaulted casemates cut into

the solid rock or roofed over with concrete where the rock gave place to softer material. Well had they done their duty, even against the eleven-inch shell, until the end came. Now, some of the openings facing the rear or gorge of the fort are sealed to the top with fallen earth and pulverised rock, some are only partially closed by the landslide from the parapet over them, their cracked arches still standing. With a sickening feeling thought turns to the men within them at the moment of the cataclysm, possibly snatching a few moments' rest, the majority, in all probability, sick or wounded. All round above stretches in a broken line the shapeless mass of the long main parapet, and just inside this there are remains of the revetment wall which supported the interior, and of the gun platforms and emplacements. This wall, which in its former ordered neatness almost suggested the idea of a battle-ship in concrete, with its searchlight emplacements, steps, davits and tackle for hoisting shell, and the regularly spaced little doors for the shelters, range-dials, ammunition-recesses and cartridge-stores, now bulges this way and that, here cracked, there fallen with the unsupported earth flowing over it. Along one face, which was the front of the fort, the only traces of it now to be seen are occasional corners appearing from the mound of loose earth and rock.

One cannot walk straight; it is necessary to avoid the boulders which lie scattered over the

ground, or the pits which honeycomb it. There a high traverse of softer earth still stands, a shapeless mound, its face all pock-marked with craters till it looks almost like a gigantic sponge. There are bodies everywhere; some lying on the surface, in the free air of heaven; some buried, so that a hand or a foot alone discloses what is below. Everywhere also are splintered timber, rifles, cartridge-boxes, belts, coats, and all the usual *débris* of a battlefield, with a monster gun overturned or pointing dumbly to the sky to emphasise that this has been no common battlefield but the fight for a fortress. There is blood too,—but not much, thanks to the merciful dust, which has softly descended in an impalpable mist and covered everything with a grey-brown pall, giving to all a mysterious velvety appearance. It has soaked up the blood, an occasional dark spot being all that is to be seen.

Beyond the huge mound of the parapet, down, deep down, except on one side, the ditch still exists. Some forty feet in depth, it ran like a great chasm round the whole fort, in places hewn out of the solid rock, with almost sheer sides. At the angles or corners where the ditch bends are jumbled heaps of concrete, steel beams, and roughly squared stones. They are what remain of the *caponiers*, those little bomb-proof buildings placed so snugly out of the way of shells right down at the bottom, whence machine-guns and quick-firers poured their devastating blight of bullets along

the cruel wire entanglements, in which the unsuccessful Japanese storming parties had been caught. Until these *caponiers* were silenced or destroyed no soul could live in that veritable chasm of death, and those grey little bodies hanging limp like broken marionettes in the thicket of barbed wire along the length of the ditch, or lying doubled up and impaled on the stakes of the *trous de loup*, bear witness to the successful part they played. The attitudes of some of the dead, who, hanging contorted, still grip a wire convulsively, give evidence of the power of the dynamo—now a heap of dust and metal in a casemate above. Gaps here and there in the maze of wire, with its springy strands all curling up above holes in the ground, show where the contact mines of the defenders burst, or where the hand-grenades of both sides fell and exploded.

On one side there is no ditch; parapet and ditch seem to have been melted together by an earthquake. Here the mine was sprung. Escarp and counterscarp have crumbled away, and the beetling parapet has slid down and filled up the ditch till the earth and rock has overflowed right on to the glacis beyond. There is no such large hole formed by the explosion as might have been expected, for it has been partially filled up by the mass falling in from all sides. The edge of what was the crater is marked by cracks and fissures, in places more than a foot wide, in the still standing

parapet on either side. The dust gives to everything a soft rounded appearance.

Looking over the glacis, the landscape is seen to be dotted for some hundreds of yards with stones and fragments of rock. Farther off, that mound shows the lodgement from which the Japanese moles started their last tunnel.

A sickening smell pervades the air.

A sentry stands motionless against the skyline under an improvised flagstaff. The only sign of life is the feeble flicker of the red and white flag above him.

# An Eddy of War.

"John Gilpin was a citizen
Of credit and renown."

As James Blaythwate pressed on, he remarked the unusual emptiness of the roads, also that several houses had blinds down, though it was but May. Had not his mind been absorbed by his own petty affairs these facts would have attracted more of his attention, and on approaching the enclosure of the little suburban station he was really quite astonished to observe its state. The whole yard was full of piles of crates, cases and sacks, and was littered with straw and waste-paper, and the place of the usual row of cabs and flys with their touting drivers was taken by a row of horseless four-wheeled carts. As he perplexedly picked his way over the heaps of rubbish, a shout from close by startled him—"'Alt-oo-goes-there?"

Puzzled as to the meaning of this expression, for it sounded like English yet conveyed no idea to his mind, he walked on, not feeling personally interested.

Again he heard the shout, in irate tones this time, and quite close. The speaker, a "common"

soldier in very dirty khaki uniform, sprang out in front of him from behind a stack of tarpaulins, and barred his way with a rifle which had a lethal-looking bayonet on the end of it.

As the man was evidently addressing him—Mr James Blaythwate—he felt constrained to say something, for the bayonet was most unpleasantly near his waistcoat.

"Well, my good man, are you speaking to me? What do you want?"

"'Oo are yer a-calling of yer good man? W'y don't you 'alt when ye're challenged? Where's yer pass?"

Convinced that by some curious chance he was dealing with a drunken person, James determined not to exasperate him by disputing the point, but to let the matter pass. Waving the soldier aside with his umbrella, he said soothingly—

"Tut, tut."

"Tut, tut, indeed. I'll tut-touch yer up, if that's yer little game."

With that the now irritated soldier put his head back and roared out some more incomprehensible jargon—"Corpril of the gord!" at the same time pointing his bayonet more directly at James's person. To avoid transfixing himself, the latter was forced to stand, and, in a moment, in response to the drunken man's yell, another khaki-clad red-faced soldier ran up from the porters' room, and seizing Blaythwate rudely by the collar, said—

"No you don't!"

Now though James was mild as mother's milk before his wife, this was not his wife, and he was getting annoyed.

"Refused to .'alt when challenged, Corpril. Tried to force me. Shouldn't wonder if 'e is one of them furrin waiters, an' got dynamite or somethink in 'is bag; d——d furriner anyway."

"You come along o' me, sonny," said the newcomer, who wore stripes on his arm and breathed hard on James's neck.

The latter was petrified with rage. He could not speak. To be violently assaulted by drunken soldiers, called a waiter, a d——d furriner, and "sonny," all within two minutes!

"Wh-wh-what the——" he stuttered, and then speech failed him. Illness and confinement to bed, excitement and the hasty walk to the station, coupled with this last outrage, worked their cumulative effect. He turned pale, felt faint and sick, and staggered slightly.

Seeing that he looked ill, the corporal loosened his hold on the collar, and saying "You'd best come quiet," offered his arm, at the same time relieving James of the bag. Two more khaki soldiers had turned up meanwhile, so he was gently led towards the platform. As he was passing through the booking-office he sought his handkerchief with his disengaged hand. "Ah, use yer revolver, would yer?" and before he could get his handkerchief, his arm and again his collar were violently seized.

This had a tonic effect, all feeling of faintness vanished, he saw red. The fighting blood of all the Blaythwates since the days of the City trained bands was roused. Uttering in a yell language, which whispered, would have paralysed his co-churchwardens, James wrenched himself free from his captors with a rending noise—as his frock-coat tore in two—and led off briskly with his pudgy left, dealing the corporal what, in the idiom of the ring, is known as "One on the Boko." That member of the "Backbone of the British Army" countered neatly by driving James's hat down to his chin with the black bag. Then as one man they leapt on him. There was a kaleidoscopic scene of red faces, khaki, and black cloth, which appeared fitfully from a cloud of dust, accompanied by scuffling, grunts, and shocking remarks, such as "Get the blighter's revolver! Mind the dynamite! Biff him!"

The struggle was sharp but short. There emerged two khaki figures, very dishevelled and minus helmets—between them a man in dusty grey clothes. His face was hidden down to the chin by a split tall hat, through the rent at the top of which his bald head showed. His black frock-coat, now grey with dust, was in tatters; his white waistcoat was smeared with blood; and his hands were securely bound by a frayed strip of silk. From within the top-hat there issued a murmuring sound. All were breathing heavily.

"'Ave you searched the blasted anarchist?"

said the corporal, as he absently stanched his bleeding nose with the prisoner's silk handkerchief, and gingerly placed the black bag in a fire bucket full of water.

"Yes, Corpril."

"Got 'is revolver?"

"There ain't no revolver."

"Been through all 'is pockets?'

"Yes, Corpril; 'ere's the contents in my 'aversack."

"Another case for the Provvo-Marshal! I wonder what 'is game is. Looks like a furriner, or one of them blooming Chunchooses, with that beard an' all. But 'e swears like an Englishman. No pass, tries to force a sentry, assaults me in the execootion of my dooty. . . . I think 'es woozy. Yes, take his boots off, same as a drunk, and put 'im in the pris'ner's room. I've given 'is bag o' dynamite a cooler in that bucket." With that the corporal went away.

James was set down, and his button-boots were taken off, none too gently. The trio then proceeded up the platform, the captive in his striped socks shuffling along the cold paving like a blind man. He was taken into the dirty oil-smelling lamp-room, his hat prised off his head, and the door locked on him, with the parting remark, "'Ope you'll doss down comfor'ble in the 'Otel Seesil."

He sat panting on the floor for some minutes. It must all be a frightful dream—the result of his

fever—to be thus seized, abused, and assaulted by drunken soldiers on the platform of his own station. Where were the station-master and porters, the usual staff?

But no, he was not dreaming—there he was, his hands tied up with his own necktie, and his bootless feet in front of him. He was sane, alive, and sober.

Many ideas occurred to him. He would write to some one—to 'The Times,' the War Office, concerning this "unheard of and inexplicable outrage—unprovoked assault." England should ring with the atrocity. He would exact a heavy penalty for all this, or he was not a free Briton, and *Habeas Corpus* had been enacted in vain. But none of this brought him nearer solving the problem of the moment, he concluded, as soon as the practical side of his nature asserted itself. His best course at present was to take a quiet line towards this band of drunken miscreants, and wait till he could see some one in authority. Of course he would escape if he could, but then he would have to return to Irrawaddy Villa and face Mrs Blaythwate! For once he did not wish to face his wife.

Now Constance Blaythwate was a dear motherly little soul, and having, unluckily, no children, poured all the honey of her affection over her husband. Not that she spoiled him by any means; she was master in her own house—and James knew it. Indeed, to have had a peep into Mr Blaythwate's home circle would perhaps have made

life seem a little less ill-balanced to some of his clerks; for if she was the master in his home, he was very much master in his office, and, to misquote Macaulay, "What Mrs Blaythwate was to Mr Blaythwate, that was Mr Blaythwate to his employés," barring the wifely affection, of course.

As this lady does not enter further into this chapter of "our" Mr B.'s biography, we can dismiss her in a few words. She was middle-aged, plump, and pleasant, nearly always wore a silk dress with a dash of lace (as some of the bar-haunting clerks would describe it), and a large cameo brooch. She loved her husband and her home: the whole house, from the door mat with "Forget-me-not" worked into the pattern, to the diminutive cosies which kept the boiled eggs warm at breakfast, showed signs of her loving care. Her husband's turnout, too, did her credit.

His illness had been a sore trial to her. It had been a most serious attack of influenza combined with nervous breakdown, and the strain of keeping up appearances and concealing from him all the truly terrible events of the past month, over and above the nursing, had told upon her health, and possibly a wee bit upon her temper. However, her attempts had been successful, and here he was at the time our story opens, thanks to her care, well on the road to convalescence, and, thanks to her cleverness, and, I am afraid, to some fibbing, quite ignorant of all that had happened and in comparative peace of mind.

Of course he had worried about his absence from business, but to have known about the war—war actually in England, added to the troubles in the East—would have long delayed his recovery, if it had not made him much worse. Sometimes, when she was saying her prayers, she did feel a little conscience-stricken at the number and magnitude of the lies she had been forced to tell him in answer to his innumerable questions; but, though no Jesuit, she thought that in this case, at least, the end justified the means. This same ignorance was now to provide one day at least of sore trial for James, though, to be just, it was his own fault and not hers. How could she have known what his intentions were?

Barely two short hours before James's brusque arrival at the "Hotel Seesil," he had been comfortably ensconced in an invalid chair, enjoying, or perhaps suffering, the nursing attentions of his wife.

"Now I think you'll do, darling," she had at last said, as she gave a pat to the pillow behind his head and wheeled the arm-chair round back to the light. "I'm glad you are sensible enough to see the absurdity of thinking of town. I shall not be back till luncheon, I have so much to do this morning, but Gwladwys will bring up your hot broth and toast at half-past eleven." (Gwladwys was the up and down maid.)

With that she took a parting glance round the room, and, after letting down the blind a foot and

then pulling it up six inches, finally went out, as there seemed nothing more for her to fuss over.

As soon as she had left the room, her husband's dull and somewhat furtive expression underwent a transformation into one of alert purpose. He listened intently. After a few moments the front door banged, and he heard the scrunch of heels along the gravel drive of Irrawaddy Villa (James did business with Burmah). In a trice he was out of his arm-chair, flinging aside book, coverlet, pillow, and at the same time upsetting a glass of barley-water, which—I regret to have to say it—he did not mop up. Shuffling to the window, he cautiously peeped out from behind the blinds. He was just in time to see that it really was his wife, as she disappeared round the corner of the conservatory. With finished cunning, bred of long premeditation, he waited at the window for five minutes to see that Connie did not return to fetch something she had forgotten, or to give him some last injunction about himself. No, he was safe. At last he would get to his business, and away from this house of bondage.

He whistled: he would get to town again, be at his office, and see how things had got on during his absence. He was not the senior partner, but, without wishing to appear conceited, he knew that he—Mr James Blaythwate—was really the firm. He had received no letters for weeks, and had not even seen a paper, so close had his wife kept him. It was true he had always been accustomed

to give way to her, and, after having been for so long helpless and dependent, had not gained sufficient strength to insist on the necessity of getting back to work. For a fortnight he had meanly pretended to acquiesce in her wishes, with the secret intention of giving her the slip at the first opportunity. Now he would do it.

His chance had come. The hospital nurse who had continued watch over him during the occasional absences of his wife had left him for good. His wife would be out for at least—he looked at the clock—two hours. He would catch the 10.40 up—not his usual train, but it would do. Without waste of time he proceeded to dress. He was by nature an orderly man, but a reaction against his wife's mechanically methodical life had set in, and he ran amok amongst his clothes in an uplifting orgy of untidiness. He rummaged in all the drawers and in his wardrobe to get out his smartest kit, flinging with wanton glee everything he did not wish to wear into a corner. At this moment he never thought of the reckoning.

At last he got as far as standing before the glass to tie his necktie. The devil! He had quite forgotten his six weeks' beard, or rather fluffy Newgate fringe, for it could hardly be called a beard. Connie had not allowed him to shave, as she thought the hair kept his neck warm. There was a grey thread or two among the brown fluff, and it looked positively loathly. There would not be time to shave and catch the 10.40, and the next up

train was not till 12.10. Now James was a natty man, and took a proper pride in his dress, had a nice taste in cravats and washing waistcoats. He affected rather a military style, wearing a moustache, keeping his handkerchief up his sleeve, and greeting his friends with a sort of salute. His hats were perhaps a leetle too shiny, and his buttonholes a thought too large; but he was, on the whole, very well turned out. He could afford to be so, as he was, in City parlance, a "warm man," and had no family.

As he gazed at himself in the glass, he almost determined to risk the 12.10, but the thought of the veal broth at 11.30 settled the matter. Beard or no beard, he would catch the 10.40. He tied his tie, put on the best starched white waistcoat he could find. There he was,—ready! He opened the door and crept down to the morning room, collected some papers, which he rammed into his pocket, and many letters, which he threw into his black bag, and brushed and put on his hat. Down the hall he tiptoed, stopping to scrawl a pencil note to his wife—"Back to dinner, love,"—and so out at the front door, closing it as gently as possible.

Soft-footed he stole down the drive, his heart in his mouth, ready to run for it should he see his wife's well-known bonnet anywhere in the distance. But, no—the Gods were with James. He saw no one, the roads were almost deserted, though it was a lovely May morning. It was only ten minutes'

walk to the station, and the road was out of Connie's usual cheesemonger-chemist-poulterer beat. At every pace the chance of detection lessened and his spirits rose: he even pursed up his lips as if whistling, but of course he did not whistle in the streets.

. . . . . .

And all in blissful ignorance of the dread happenings of the last few weeks! We all remember that by May of that year the war in England was at its height. The dinghies had disgorged their thousands, and the Huns had landed their armies, as the papers put it, "on our fair country's soil," and seemed to be on the point of overrunning the southern counties. It was a critical moment. Indecisive encounters had been fought, but, notwithstanding the gallantry displayed by our troops and the promptness with which schemes had been improvised to meet the invasion, the possibility of which had never been officially recognised, the enemy seemed to have established a foothold. At this time of stress, when reinforcements sent East had so severely drained the supply of soldiers, it needed a mighty effort to get together a sufficiently large citizen army to cope with the invader. How the tide turned and the wave of invasion was driven back is an old story, a topic that has been worn threadbare; and it is not our purpose to summarise in a few words the history of so great an event We only aim at sketching one little episode.

It was just at this juncture that James Blayth-

wate, slinking down to the station, with nothing bigger looming on his mental horizon than an overmastering desire to escape his fond spouse and get up to his business, had suddenly encountered War —red War—and was now recovering from the shock in the "Hotel Seesil."

. . . . . .

To return to him. He stood up and examined his prison. The door was stout and secure; the window was open but barred. By squeezing his face close between the bars he was able to catch a glimpse round the corner. He saw the same sentry walking up and down. For a drunken man, James could not help thinking, he appeared very steady. As a matter of fact, his monotonous and regular march to and fro, and the decisive bang with which he brought his rifle down when he stopped, by no means betokened drunkenness. Curious! He had been so inconsistently savage only a few minutes before. However, Blaythwate did not desire any more dealings with this particular person, and decided to wait till he saw some one else, though he would have given almost a sovereign—say fifteen and ninepence—for a glass of water.

While cooling his fevered brow against the iron bars something happened. The corporal, whose nose was now quite bulbous, came up with a fresh soldier, who faced the sentry. The corporal emitted a series of barks, and the men indulged in a sort of war dance, and, with much waving and

slapping of rifles, solemnly set to partners. The new man changed places with the old sentry, who went away with the corporal.

James watched all these rites with a keen eye: he was perforce taking some interest in soldiering. The new sentry was a mere lad, and a pleasant-looking one to boot, so James, by now wary, plucked up his courage and whistled. No result. The sentry gave no sign. "Soldier!" said Blaythwate.

Again no result.

"I say, sergeant!" said the guileful James, with unction; "could I have some water?"

This was productive of some result, but the soldier did not reply or approach. He merely put back his head and yelled out the same shibboleth as the previous sentry: "Corpril of the gord!"

As this worried N.C.O. came running up, James could not help wondering at the strange habit of sentries of not replying when addressed, but of shouting for some one else.

As soon as he had ascertained what the "anarchist" wanted, the corporal brought a tin mug of water. As the prisoner was quiet, he untied his hands to allow him to drink, and waxed more affable. James wanted to put a number of questions; but the corporal was most reserved. All that he would vouchsafe was that he—Blaythwate—would see the officer soon enough if he remained quiet; that the penalty for spies under martial law was death; and that anything he

said now might be brought up in evidence against him! With that he tramped off.

James ruminated again with closed eyes. What did the corporal mean by Spies—Death—Martial Law? Surely this was carrying manœuvres to an extreme limit. It could not be manœuvres. If it were not the ill-timed jest of a detachment on the spree—and certainly the soldiers did not now appear so drunk as he had thought them at first—it could be only one thing—War! But even supposing there were war, why talk of martial law in England? War to him had always been a vague, impalpable thing; it chiefly touched him through the Market. But for such an extreme step, involving interference with the liberty of the subject, which no free-born Briton would stand for two days, the only imaginable excuse would be war in England. Such an eventuality was naturally unthinkable. Who had ever taken seriously such vain tales as "The Battle of Dorking," or any of the numerous subsequent imitations written by alarmists and hare-brained military faddists? Yet this seemed the only logical explanation of events. His head ached, and his brain began to whirl.

Poor fellow! he had been given no chance. He was behind the times. Events had moved beyond his ken; and the machinery of war, into whose workings he had been so roughly jerked, had been set in action by a chain of events logical enough to any one else. Most of us were then going through

the mill. We had paid our footing. At that moment we were serving our country in one capacity or another—soldiers at the front, soldiers on the communications, transport drivers, hospital orderlies, special constables, cyclist messengers, storemen, clerks, accountants, overseers. We had taken our places in the scheme of things as we severally felt the call. Blaythwate had fallen suddenly into the vortex, or, more accurately, into an eddy, and might well feel a bit dazed.

His hands being free, he reached for his handkerchief. His pockets were empty: his money was gone, his watch and chain, cigar-case, and the specially important papers he had placed in his pocket,—all gone! His feelings underwent a revulsion. War! What did he care? Damn war! It was the business of the overpaid and underworked soldiery, for the upkeep of which he was taxed; the business of the horde of licentious bandits who had, apparently for purposes of their own, mutinied, sacked the public-houses, got beastly drunk, and were now engaged in rapine and assault of the inoffensive populace. What was war to him compared to his business? He had lost enough already by his illness, and was he now to be robbed by men paid to defend him? He vented his ire upon his battered top-hat, furiously kicking it round the room.

Presently he heard the tramp of armed men. The door was thrown open, and he was told to "come on." Upon inquiring for his boots he was

informed that it was "agin the regulations." With a resigned sigh he started down the platform, a soldier in front, one behind, and the corporal alongside. Luckily there were none of the usual top-hatted crowd about, and the few soldiers and civilians within sight were too busy to pay any attention. His heart gave a leap as he saw that he was being taken towards the station-master's office. The rubicund little station-master, Mr Jones, was a friend of his, or, rather, as much a friend as anybody in his position could be to one in Mr Blaythwate's. But as the party approached the office James was surprised to see printed over the door the words "RAILWAY STAFF OFFICER." Arrived at the door, he was almost startled out of his skin by a bellow of—"Prisne-ran-descort, How!"

This evidently meant the party to stop, for the leading man abruptly, and without warning, pulled up. The unsuspecting James ran full tilt into him, calling forth an audible anathema. Though only three feet away, the corporal continued in a hail-the-maintop voice—

"Ri-tur!"

Whereupon James found himself jerked round to his right by his neighbours, who then stood one on each side of him. He gave up attempting to understand what was said, and simply watched the soldiers so as to do as they did.

"Staatees!"

He vaguely shuffled his feet as he saw them do.

The non-com. now disappeared into the office, and there was peace for two minutes; he came out. "Prisne-ran-descort, Shun! Ri-tur! Wick-mar! How! Ri-tur!"

Somehow Blaythwate found himself standing before a table littered with papers, behind which sat a tired-looking man, also in khaki, apparently writing telegrams for a wager. He did not even look up for some little time, but continued to write. He was evidently an officer, and James gradually became indignant at being practically ignored after his shocking treatment. He burst out—

"Sir, I protest, I——"

His speech was cut short by a heavy nudge in the ribs and a hoarse whisper of "Wait till the orficer speaks to you."

After a minute or two the latter, who was unshaven and appeared as if he had been up all night (as indeed was the case), looked up sharply.

"Well, Corporal, what is this?"

"Pris'ner, sir. Refused to 'alt when challenged, tried to force number two sentry, and assaulted me when confining 'im. One of these furrin anarchist waiters, I think, sir."

"Have you searched him?"

"Yessir. 'Ere's a hinventory of 'is effecks, which are in this 'aversack, an' money an' personal trinkets in the pooch." And he handed them to the officer. James felt there was now at least a chance of getting his papers back.

"Was he armed?"

"Non' on 'im, sir, but 'e 'ad a suspicious-lookin' black bag."

"What was in it? Where is it?"

"I did not open it, sir. Thought it safer to drown the charge first: some of these 'ere infernal machines are made to go orf when they're opened, I've 'eard. The bag rests in a fire-bucket in the booking-office."

James writhed.

"Evidence?"

"Number two ort four ort six, Private J. Smith, and four seven nine three, Private Hooley, sir."

But the officer, who had been keenly examining Mr Blaythwate, decided to hear what he had to say before wading through the evidence. He said—

"Who are you?"

"I am James Blaythwate, of the well-known firm of Blaythwate Bros. & Buttery——"

"What nationality? Say 'the.'" (*N.B.*, this was a test word.)

"Why, English, of course. What the devil——"

"Hold on a moment, Mr Blathway. You must admit appearances are against you. To cut matters short—have you a pass?"

"No, I have a season."

"No, no. I mean a martial-law pass or permit, to identify you and allow you to travel."

"No. I don't even know what you are talking about."

"Can you name any responsible local man or official to vouch for you? You don't look as if you were the gentleman you name."

James could not but admit the truth of this remark, and was just about to ask the officer to take one of his business cards out of his pocket-book, when he caught sight of the cheery face of the station-master passing the door.

"Mr Jones," he called out, "Mr Jones!"

Mr Jones came in and coldly looked this bearded tramp up and down. Then a gleam of recognition came into his eyes.

"Why, if it is not Mr James Blaythwate! Why, Mr Blaythwate, sir, I hardly knew you. Whatever have you been doing to yourself? Well, well, well!"

This was conclusive. At any rate, the officer took it as a proof of identification.

"Well, what about this charge, Mr —er——?"

"Blaythwate," put in James.

"Thanks. Mr Blaythwate, what have you to say? It is a very serious charge in time of war."

"I think I can explain all that, sir. It is all a misunderstanding," pleaded James, now quite humble. "I could explain it to you," with a meaning glance at the escort.

"Do you answer for this man, Mr Jones?"

"Why, yes, sir; he is a churchwarden of my church."

At this Captain Waters nodded to the corporal.

The latter discreetly, though noisily, withdrew his cohort. Mr Blaythwate then proceeded to explain matters (amid many interruptions from the telephone). He had not proceeded far before the officer had to request him to confine himself to facts as time was short, and the rest could be heard later. The Captain found very soon, to his stupefaction, that Mr Blaythwate was ignorant of the fact that the country was invaded or that war was in our midst. Finally, he said: "I see well enough that an error has been made, and I apologise on behalf of my men, who were only doing their duty. There were mistakes on both sides. I will do all I can for you. If you will go into that little room labelled 'Officers,' you will find some water and something to drink. Please make yourself at home for a quarter of an hour. I then come off duty, and will see you. I'll have your boots and bag taken round."

Captain Waters, though he had been worried all night by many more weighty matters, was much interested in this self-important specimen of a British Rip Van Winkle, and promised himself a few minutes out of his precious hours off duty elucidating this mystery. For a quarter of an hour he continued writing. Then another officer (his relief) came in and greeted him.

"Good morning, Johnnie."

"Hullo, Birdie! Goo' morning. I have a hairy wild specimen of a 'cit' here, who has been running amuck with the guard and got the worst of

it. He seems a harmless sort of lunatic, who must have escaped from an asylum or prison, as he didn't know we were at war!"

"Oh, ratth! He ith thome damned thpy who ith getting round you, old cock. You are much too thoft-hearted with thethe cunning bruteth. Could he pronounth 'th'?"

"Yes, yes; but not quite so fluently as you can! He has already been taken for a dynamiter on his way to wreck the line, and has been knocked about and his bag of papers soaked in a bucket of water. Well, I'm off to find out some more about him. Here are the papers."

When Waters joined Blaythwate, the latter had washed his face, put on his boots, and was sorting pulpy wet papers out of his bag. Luckily the most important had been in his pocket. The whisky had run out, and James at once said he would get some at the refreshment-room.

"No; I'm afraid you will not," said Waters.

"Why not?"

"Because all railway refreshment-rooms are forbidden to sell liquor. They chiefly sell biscuits, tinned things, hot coffee, soup of sorts, and chocolate!"

"My word!" said James.

"Look here," said Waters, "before I start off to explain matters fully—do you still wish to go up to Town?"

"Yes, please."

"Well, I'll write you out a pass which will carry

you through; but you will not go up for some time. The Flying Cit—the train for business men, you know—goes up at 9 A.M. every day. It is the only up passenger train. There are several up empties running back from the front, which do not stop here, but I think there is a 'mixed wounded and sick' coming through in about an hour, which will. But you can't go up as you are. Will you go home and change? You have plenty of time."

"No, by no means. If I do, it will be no Town for me to-day. Can I borrow some clothes?"

"Oh yes. Mr Jones 'll lend you a suit, I expect. He's about your size. I'm sorry I have nothing here. Besides, mine would not fit you."

They found Mr Jones, borrowed the clothes, clean linen, and tweed cap. Blaythwate looked fairly respectable again, though a trifle more sporting than usual.

"If I might make a suggestion?" said Waters.

"Yes?"

"I think I would take off that beard. You see, it has probably been knocked about a bit; but it does not look very well, and I think was partly the cause of your rough treatment. Beards are regarded with suspicion nowadays. I am not going to shave for a few minutes, so I will lend you my shaving tackle first."

James was only too pleased: and ten minutes afterwards had his usual pink chin, smooth and clean, and felt good. He and Waters became almost confidential. He told the latter all his

adventures in detail, and found him most sympathetic.

"Yes, that's the worst of it," said he; "a war has not taken place in England since—the Lord knows when, and our population, even the best-intentioned, are so ignorant about what it really means, that our troops have been severely handicapped. We have lost incalculably through it. All sorts of private and civil interests, and so-called 'rights of the subject,' have been safeguarded and taken care of, instead of letting everything else go except the main object—to beat the enemy. Why, I have heard that during the first few days the soldiers were chary of trespassing and that it took a lot of persuading to make them enter any preserved woods; but I can hardly believe it. However, our friends the 'Huns' did not respect much, and have played 'All-in to win.' I think one wealthy landowner said he would claim compensation because a British cavalry regiment bivouacked in his park. Two days afterward he was forced to billet and feed a battalion of Jägers in his manor, a lot of his immemorial trees were felled, his billiard-room used as an operating-room, and his motor commandeered by the officer in command! But we are learning: and now that martial law has been declared,—only after a hot debate, mind you, even though the enemy was in England,—people are realising what 'War' is. We are doing better."

James had hardly taken in the latter end of the

sentence: he was puzzling over the Jägers. He dealt in such things himself, but in bales, not in battalions, and why feed them? He gave up the riddle: military jargon, no doubt.

"But you haven't told me where the fighting has been going on, or what the situation is now. I hope I may be allowed to have some idea."

"Oh, I'll explain to you. I wish I had a map, but I gave mine away. However," and, with the aid of a pipe or two and a tin of tobacco, he proceeded to explain what he called "the general and special ideas of the posish."

He added a brief narrative of the landing and subsequent operations up to that time. Mr Blaythwate was at heart a man and a patriot, and the recital of the indignities, defeats, and insults put on his country, thus brought home to him, made his blood boil. He clenched his fists—white fists, pudgy fists—and resolved to join the forces next day. Numerous were his questions, some of them not much to the point, but they showed he was waking up the right way. At length, as Waters answered his last question, he lay back in his chair and said—

"Good Lord! and I have known nothing about it all, and done nothing!" He paused pensively. "A moment, please,—there are one or two things I have not grasped. Why did the soldiers call me a foreign waiter and suspect dynamite?"

Waters grinned "That's quite simple to explain. Well, you know the Vaterland is always ready,

always secretly preparing. The Japanese were the same. The majority of good Huns all over the world being old soldiers, the Huns will be particularly well placed at the day of Armageddon, for their agents all over the globe are trained and prepared to do their little best to assist. It's all run by the Hunnish General Staff under the title of 'Die Götterdämmerung Gesellschaft,' or the Company of the Twilight of the Gods. In London the Gesellschaft has sub-branches in the 'Allgemeine Panhunsche Kellnerverein'—that's the Universal Pan-Hunnish Waiters' League—and the 'Blutwurst Bund,' consisting of clerks chiefly. You know how London swarms with that sort of chap? Well, so far they have helped their country by blowing up the railway bridges at important points—points most cleverly chosen so as to impede our mobilisation. Among other things, they messed up all the telephone and telegraph wires in London. The result was chaotic. They say that when the Chief of Staff was trying to telephone to some general about a move, he got on to the *chef* at the Carlton, who gave him hell for not sending up enough plovers' eggs!

"This being so, we are particularly watchful against all foreigners now, and I am afraid a great many innocent English and foreign persons are inconvenienced. You carried a bag, you wore a scrubby beard, you did not appear to understand the sentry, you struggled,—hence the mistake. Well, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll turn in a

spell. It won't be so long before your train comes along. Here's one of the empties running through now."

It was a tedious wait, but as he sat on James had plenty to think about, and was getting himself adjusted, as it were, into his new world. He was interested to see some trains of wounded go up, and several others of soldiers, guns, horses, and supplies pass through on their way to the front. At last his train arrived.

"Once in a first-class carriage I shall feel myself again." He was soon to be undeceived. The train was a long one, made up of carriages, flat open trucks, and cattle-waggons, all rather dirty.

"I suppose you've got a pass," said the guard, rather crustily. Blaythwate hastened to show the permit Waters had written out for him on the yellow form. "Oh, all right, but you can't go in the carriages, you know, as they're full of wounded. Get into one of those open waggons. They haven't cleaned the cattle-vans, but, please God, they'll do it some day."

One by one his prospects of comfort were slipping away. Travel in an open truck was certainly the last thing he had ever thought of, but he was a man of his word,—it was always a favourite expression of his in the city,—and now he had got so far he intended to see the thing through. At the worst, it would be a series of experiences such as few others could boast. Presently they started.

At any rate, he was now at last on the road

to London. He looked back at the station: the neat brick buildings, with the smoke curling from a chimney or two, looked as peaceful as could be; the only thing that seemed queer as he surveyed the scene was the unusual emptiness of the road. Well, not quite deserted, for there was something moving. It was coming down the road, and hurriedly too. By Jingo! a female figure, a cerise-coloured bonnet. It could not be—yes, it *was* Connie, and no other!

It flashed through his mind that she must have returned early, discovered his escape, followed on his track, and come to see whether he had got away yet. She was running now. Doubtless she saw that the train was moving out. Faintly borne on the breeze the now familiar cry greeted his ears, "'Alt-oo-goes-there?"

That was all; the train was now increasing speed, and the station was receding into the distance. James sank down on a tarpaulin, and wondered with a sort of detached interest what his wife's encounter with the sentry would be like. *She* mightn't understand, either. He pictured her rather annoyed. Would they call her "woozy," too? He felt almost inclined to back the lady if it came to a struggle. Fancy Mrs B. having her boots taken off! Bad James chortled a little, I am afraid.

They always seemed to be passing trains going in the opposite direction, full of men, horses, waggons, and guns. The men were crammed into

trucks, as cheerful as you please, singing and shouting, but not looking as tidy as they are usually represented in pictures. Then there were endless waggons loaded with bulky stuff, which he thought must be provisions and stores. Presently, after crawling along for a while, they stopped away from a station on the top of an embankment. Something had happened here, apparently, for a lot of baulks of timber were strewn about at the foot of the slope, and heavy things had been dragged along. Blaythwate saw a number of men on the line at the front of the train. It was no use speculating, he knew, but he hoped that they were not being attacked by the enemy. There was hammering going on, and many figures could be seen running about. He was just moving over to have a look from the other side when a voice from below addressed him:

"Have you any jacks with you?" The speaker seemed to be an officer, from the authoritative way in which he spoke.

"No, I haven't seen any Jacks; but there are lots of soldiers in the train," was the innocent reply.

"What d'you mean? I want to know about my stores, not your dam silly jokes. Didn't you come up with the stores?"

"No, sir," responded the other, who, seeing how arbitrary these soldiers were apt to be, thought he had better be respectful. "I haven't anything to do with stores: I am only a passenger."

The officer passed on hurriedly, and another man in dirty khaki then came up, asking whether there was any news from the front, adding that "The —— waiters were probably surprised that the bridge had been mended so quickly."

"Oh, has the bridge been broken?" asked Blaythwate.

"*Of* course, what d'you think?" said the man; "but it wasn't what you might rightly call a demolishin'; we only had to shore up the ends of the girders, but it was a bit awkward 'cause we're short of plant: thet's the reason why the captain asked if you'd got some. . . . Dam foolishness I call it," continued he, "not to have seen that these anarchist jokers would be after doing damage. It's good biz that they're mostly swep' up into camps like that one over there,"—indicating an assemblage of tents which lay in an enclosure of barbed wire not far from the line. "They were getting a bit unpopular, and if just a few of them *were* lynched, it served them jolly well right. The police are shepherding them now to rights, but it 'ud be better to dump the lot somewhere abroad, *I* think. So long!" The train moved on.

Time was getting on, and our passenger was becoming very tired and hungry: the journey was horribly tedious, so he thought it would be well to lie down and see if he could get a little sleep. After all, he found the tarpaulin was better than nothing as a couch, and he slept the sleep of exhaustion. He was aroused by being shaken.

"Now then, sir, you must get out here. Train can't get any farther."

Dazed and blinking, James painfully climbed down from his truck. It was night. In front was a network of rails shimmering in the different coloured lights reflected from the signals which dotted the night, high and low. Engines were on all sides, pulling and pushing long trains of trucks, some empty, some full of horses. The spring evening was made hideous by the panting of engines, the banging of trucks, the kicking of horses against the sides, the almost continuous shrieking of whistles, and the shouts of the shunters. It was all a common enough scene, but never before witnessed by our friend from so intimate a standpoint. He stood by his truck. In this sliding pandemonium it seemed like a friend, for alongside it he knew he was safe in the six-foot way: once he left it and launched himself out on the wilderness of rails he would be lost, for he could not tell when he was between the rails and when not.

A sudden rusty croak, almost at his feet, startled him, and looking down he saw a patch of blood-red light on his leg. It quite upset his nerves for a moment, but after all it seemed to be part and parcel of the whole terrible day. It was war, war in England, and of course there was blood, blood everywhere. He looked again and saw the cause. It was a ground disc signal, which had been switched round. By its light he realised

how near he was to the next rail, and hastily drew back towards his truck.

Presently the guard and two other officials came down the line discussing the detraining of the wounded.

"Hullo, you still here?"

"Yes," ruefully assented James. "To tell the truth, I don't know which way to go. I dare not move."

"Oh, 'arf a mo', sir, I'll show you the way to the station, if you will follow me."

Blaythwate cheered up.

"Now then, just come along with me, keep close behind, and step where I step," and off he strode, Blaythwate following him, with furtive glances up and down the lines as he crossed each rail.

"Where are you bound for?"

"I did intend to get to my office in the city, but I counted on being carried right through into St Paul's Station."

"Why, bless you, sir, that's impossible. That's what we've all been wishing for, for the last three weeks. The waiters blew down Blackfriars Bridge the first thing. They are knowing ones, and knew where the shoe would pinch pretty well."

"But what is the special importance of that bridge? I should have thought Cannon Street much more important. Though I personally do not go there as a rule, there are thousands more city men who go to Cannon Street every day than to St Paul's."

"That's right, sir, from your point of view, but you see it's this way. Their object was not to inconvenience the city gents, or, as we call them, 'Daily Breaders,' no offence to you, sir, but to delay and throw out of gear this here concentration of troops; it's the hard and bony troops that would do the fighting, not you juicy gents. Now, though very annoying, no doubt, to the business men, the smashing of Cannon Street Bridge would not have helped the enemy more than a headache in their real object. Cannon Street is a dead end —it don't lead nowhere. But Blackfriars is one of the main links across the Thames, which connect the railway systems of the north of England with them of the south. Oh, I believe you—they're no mugs, these 'uns. They knoo where they'd put us in a hat."

By this time they had reached the platform, Blaythwate marvelling at the intelligence of the guard.

"Well, I must be going on with my work now, sir; I am not sure what to advise you. I don't think they'll let you cross the river without a special permit. They're mighty particular now, but I'm not certain. I think your best way would be to walk to London Bridge and try that way first,—it's quite close."

"Oh, I shall drive, I think," said Blaythwate airily.

"Excuse *me*. Not for love nor money. You won't see many horses nor taxi's about now, they're

all commandeered for the army, leastways those that are workable. You'd best go straight down there, then first to the right under the railway, and bear to the left, and you have London Bridge staring you in the face. 'K'you, sir, much obliged. I wish you luck."

His guide was right; outside in the street there were no cabs, no motor-buses, no horses, and most of the shops were shut. The town looked extremely desolate. James betook himself in the direction advised, and soon found London Bridge.

There were large gates across the roadway, and a red lamp, as at a level crossing. As he approached them, a man in blue, with a rifle and bandolier, stepped out from the shadow into the light. It was an armed police sentry.

"Pass, please."

"I have no pass. I am Mr Ja——"

"Carn't help who you are. You're not going across this bridge without a permit."

"But I want to get to my office in the City, or at least to a hotel in the West End," almost whimpered Blaythwate.

"Carn't 'elp it, sir. You will have to stay this side to-night. You can get a pass, if you're all right, from a Provvo-Marshal at one of the South London Police Stations in the morning;" then, as James still hesitated, "Pass along, please, pass along,—no loitering allowed near the bridges."

There was nothing for it. Blaythwate felt like one of those wretched outcasts he had often pitied

on the Embankment. He turned away and dejectedly started to walk westward. He would try all the bridges on his way. He did not know this part of London, but he had an idea of his bearings from the river.

Buying some food at an eating-house, he pushed on through a network of gloomy slums and streets, shadowy, crooked and confusing. Eventually he arrived at Blackfriars road bridge.

Here he found another armed police guard. The sentry, by strange good fortune, was a constable of the City force who had often been on duty near Blaythwate's office, and knew him. Though he recognised him, and was most considerate and polite, he would not allow James to cross. He chatted for a few minutes, however, with the disconsolate wanderer, and explained several points to him,—how all the policemen who were reservists had been armed, and a jolly good thing too; how there had been anti-foreign riots and some lynching before the aliens had been concentrated in camps. James remembered the camp of the aliens by the railway, which had puzzled him not a little.

Alongside was the damaged railway bridge being repaired, a blaze of light and crowded with men and engines of every sort, from locomotives to gigantic steam-cranes.

In the gap, a confused mass of piles; but the underside of the bridge, as indeed of all the others, was lit up more brilliantly than the top,

and busy little steam-launches full of armed men skimmed hither and thither, patrolling the waterway. Tired as he was, James was fascinated by the scene, and dreamily watched the scintillations of light reflected on the shiny black ooze, uncovered by the ebbing tide. He gradually forgot himself and his troubles, — his mind turned to weightier matters. How about the front? A vague dread seized him; what if we should not win? What if we could not force back the invader? The feeling was like what he had experienced, with all of us, in the Black Week of December 1899. He must inquire for news. He really had heard no war news since his talk with Waters—hours ago.

Perhaps the tide of invasion had rolled forward. Perhaps the advanced guard of the Hunnish horde had reached Musfield Hill, and patrols of Bashi-bazouks, Zouaves, Cossacks, or Uhlans (he wasn't very clear about these foreign names) were scouting round Irrawaddy Villa. It was possible even that some bearded Visigoth had invaded the sanctity of his little home, and was entering without using the door-mat! But at this point he smiled. There would be Connie to be dealt with — unless she had been detained all day in the "Hotel Seesil."

There was none of the usual roar of the City. It seemed comparatively dead. Ten o'clock began to boom out clearly across the river from Big Ben.

At that moment there was a detonation which

seemed to split the very earth; the whole of the southern sky, from the tops of the houses, which stood out an inky mass, to the zenith, burst into one dazzling sheet of flame. Blaythwate, with every other soul near him, was hurled down by the concussion. When he collected himself and could sit up, he found his friend police-constable Thompson on all-fours close by. All the lights had gone out.

"Yes," muttered the policeman, in a tone of almost personal grievance, "there goes the gas-ometers. I knoo they'd do it. I said so."

Blaythwate sat on in the darkness.

# The Point of View.

"The more that clear-sightedness and intellectual influence upon the course of a battle is demanded of a general, the more he must keep himself out of serious danger to life and limb."—VON DER GOLTZ.

## I.

THE sinking sun, seen through the overhanging cloud of dust and smoke, quickly lost its brilliancy and turned crimson before becoming obscured in the dust which hung over the battlefield. From the light which still remained in the sky it was evident that though hidden the sun had not yet set.

A dirty soldier in a once drab uniform stood in his niche in a zigzag trench. Bringing down his rifle—with which he had been doing some fancy shooting—in order to press in a fresh clip of cartridges, he noticed that the wood casing near the fore-end was again smouldering. Without troubling to extract the cartridges he threw the weapon down, and stepping to one side took another from the clutch of a dead man on his left. The curious tinkling sound made when the gun fell

or he moved his feet was due to the cartridge-cases collected in the bottom of the trench, for fighting had been hard and continuous. Without delay, but without hurry, he adjusted the sights of the fresh rifle, saw that the magazine was charged, and again leant forward, his right cheek against the stock, his left temple cosily against a boulder. No separate report could be distinguished in the general rattle along the trench, yet the action of his hand as he pressed trigger and opened and closed bolt showed that he was once more busy. He continued steadily firing. Here it was still a purely fire action, though at point-blank range; but the fixed bayonets and their condition showed that these men did not rely entirely on "fire-effect."

Just as the sun really set there occurred one of those lulls which sometimes take place for no apparent reason over large sections of a prolonged battle. Both sides, as if by mutual consent to salute the departing day, ceased firing, and the sudden comparative silence was more disturbing than the preceding din. It was but a brief hush. Anxious to make the most of the remaining daylight, one fired here, another there, then two or three, then dozens, until the noise of separate shots, save the nearest, was again lost.

From the right, close by the trench in which the drab soldier was so busy shooting, there rang out a report — that double note which is never heard from behind a firearm — and with a soft

cough the man subsided in a heap on to the jingling cartridges below. His rifle, supported squarely on the parapet, remained where it was.

"Now we've got it in the neck again!" philosophically grunted his neighbour,—from the shape of the niche in which the dead man had been so snugly ensconced he could only have been hit from a shot fired from behind. "Those brutes on the right have gone too soon and given us away, and the Sergeant has kept us here too long. Thought he would. Pity the little Lieutenant is dead!"

He was wrong—the "brutes" on the right could not help going. They had in their turn been given away by the chain of circumstances.

There was no anger in his voice, but a resigned annoyance, for the feelings of these men had become dulled. Desperate fighting mostly ending in retirement leads first to exasperation, then to uneasiness, and finally to dogged apathy, if not to soddenness. These men were now in a groove—the groove of duty: they fought all day, killed as many of the enemy as they could, and then, though it was understood to be an advance, nearly always retired at night: it had become mechanical. They had ceased to wonder when it would be their turn to attack: in fact, it would have been impossible at this stage to have got these men to assume the offensive, for a habit—especially of retirement—is only too easily acquired.

Several reports now sounded on the right, and

one or two more men had fallen by the time that the Sergeant in command made up his mind to go back. He whistled. The remnants of the company picked up their belongings mechanically, took the bandoliers and the bolts from the rifles of the dead, and then scrambled away among the boulders, the long grass and the scrub, up the hillside.

Three men stayed behind, crouching in the deserted trench, which, when empty, looked all the more squalid in its litter of food, scraps of paper, and empty cardboard boxes. Two busied themselves burying some things like ration-tins with short pieces of cord attached under little mountains of the brass cartridge-cases; the third crawled along to the end till he came to the water-cans—one was still full. He put out his hand, then paused: he was an educated, thoughtful man. Why should he spill it? *They* had been on the advance, fighting as they came, all day, and must be half dead from thirst. *They* had no trenches ready to retire to, no water placed handy for them. All *they* found to receive them was abandoned works half-filled with expended cartridges, expended human beings, and possibly a live grenade or two. Poor devils! Why should——? He heard a shout—"Come out, you fool; they're lit!"—there was a fizzing noise. Habit was too strong: he did the right thing, and kicked over the can before he climbed out and followed the others. He had barely gone

a hundred yards before the detonations of the exploding grenades overtook him. But the on-coming enemy had been caught before, and this time the shower of stones and hail of brass cases had nothing but corpses upon which to vent their spite. A few moments later and two or three crouching forms stole through the twilight and crept into the trench. They went straight to the water-cans.

Only when the artificial gloom of the smoke and dust screen had been overcome by the darkness of night did the pervading hellish noise finally abate. Even then the hush was relative, for wild bursts of musketry broke out in different directions as attempts were made by one side or the other to advance under cover of darkness, or when bodies of men, unnerved by days of continual strain, started in uncontrollable panic to shoot at nothing. The closeness of the two forces in some places was marked by the shouts of hand-to-hand combat and the detonations of grenades. At some distance from the firing lines the intermittent reports and explosions were all that could be distinguished, but from closer the thud of picks was audible—the metallic jar of their steel points ringing out against flints—and the hoarse rasp of shovels. More prosaic work perhaps than much of that which had gone on before that day; but, to judge from the way in which weary men were digging after a long day's fighting, and from the fact that in some places where the soil was hard or the fire too hot

they were using corpses as a parapet, it was not less urgent. Now and then a gun was heard.

As soon as the light faded altogether from the sky, the yellow flames of different conflagrations glowed more crimson, and the great white eyes of the searchlights shone forth, their wandering beams lighting up now this, now that horror. Here and there in that wilderness of dead bodies—the dreadful "No-Man's-Land," between the opposing lines—deserted guns showed up singly or in groups, glistening in the full glare of the beam or silhouetted in black against a ray passing behind. These guns were not abandoned—the enemy's fire had stripped them of life as a flame strips a feather. There they remained inert and neutral, anybody's or nobody's property, the jumbled mass of corpses around them showing what a magnetic inducement guns still offer for self-sacrifice, in spite of the fact that for artillery to lose guns is no longer necessarily considered the worse disgrace.

Not far from the deserted zig-zag trench stood two such batteries.

In proportion as the crash of firearms died away the less noisy but far more awful sounds of a battlefield could be heard rising in a wail from all sides, especially from the space between the lines. All through that summer night the searchlights glared on this scene of human woe: all through that summer night tired and overwrought human beings dodged, dug, shot, stabbed, fell asleep or died where they happened to be.

Except in details this little scene of retirement was like many others taking place among the low hills to right and left. All day the fight had swayed backwards and forwards with varying success, and now the enemy, pressing forward a counter-stroke, had, after immense efforts, broken through, thus forcing the line on each side of them to curl back in self-defence. The troops were not fighting upon fresh ground, for it was a bare two days since they had advanced, and now in their retirement they were using their old trenches.

It was the close of a July day, and this was part of the central section of the battle which extended for thirty odd miles—the central section of the great attack which had lasted nearly a week, and to the minds of all the soldiers and many of the officers in the section had failed miserably. It had now degenerated from attack into defence, for during the last two days the movement had been retrograde and not at all what they had expected. To-day had been the culmination for those in this section; they had gradually been forced back almost to their starting-point, and it seemed that the enemy's entire army had been concentrated against them, that some one had blundered, and that they were to be left to bear the whole brunt of the attack. All their efforts had been futile, the appalling slaughter without result—the enemy were still pressing on harder. This much every man could see for himself, and it was under the circumstances natural that

those quite ignorant of what was happening elsewhere should imagine that the whole army was beaten.

To the battery commander now lying wounded under an upturned waggon just on that knoll, it seemed the end of all things. He had lost nearly all his men, all his horses, and there—just over there—deserted save by corpses, were his guns. He could see them: no, he was no longer able to, for though he knew it not the mist of death was before his eyes. For him the immediate surroundings were too strong: it seemed the end of the battle. The fighting of miles, his own personal hurt, were swallowed up in the sense of immediate, overwhelming disaster. Though an educated, scientific, broad-minded soldier, he died under the bitter sense of a great defeat. His comrade in misfortune, unwounded, perhaps felt the *débâcle* even more. The infantry brigadier, now resting in the same ravine as his men, was suffering similar mental agony. Of his splendid Eighth Brigade of strong battalions, the best in the army—nearly at full strength that morning,—he had now left after that fatal counter-attack one battalion and some remnants. Even the divisional commander, a little farther away, at the end of a telephone wire, was puzzled and at last perturbed.

*He* realised that his was only a holding attack, and that his business was to occupy and to keep back the enemy whilst some one else struck. He had been holding for days, but was now no longer

keeping them back. *He* knew full well that the battle would be decided miles away, and that relief would come from elsewhere—but when? When?

## II.

On the afternoon of that day two men stood talking under a trellis arch covered by a Crimson Rambler at the corner of a lawn. One was tall and elderly, with a slight stoop; the other, of middle-age, had an alert appearance, accentuated by the shortness of a tooth-brush moustache. Both were in officer's service dress; but though in uniform the taller of the two wore slung across his back—not a haversack, binoculars, revolver, or any martial trappings—but an ordinary fishing-creel. On the ground at his feet lay something in a case which looked suspiciously like a rod, and a landing-net. While he conversed he flipped slowly through the pages of a fat pocket-book. As the two stood there talking, the whole setting was suggestive of the happy opening scene of a play. The stagey effect of the two figures in the sunlit garden was heightened by the extreme neatness of the uniforms—seemingly brand-new—and the vivid emerald green of the gorget patches. The cheery tone of the conversation also sounded forced and not in accordance with the anxious faces.

The scene was real enough, the occasion intensely so; but the two officers were, to a certain extent,

acting. They had to, in order to keep going, and it needed an effort.

"Wireless still working all right? No interference?" finally said the elder. His note was now almost querulous, and he still fidgeted with his pocket-book.

"Quite, sir," replied the junior shortly, for the hundredth time, his brusquerie a great contrast to the other's slightly peevish tone. He was a specimen of the type of officer who is apt to confuse curtness and smartness; moreover, he had during the last few hours been much badgered by his superior. In spite also of his evident efforts to maintain the ideal demeanour of the perfect staff-officer, he was unable to entirely restrain his surprise at the fishing get-up.

"Well, let me know at once when they are ready to open the ball. You know where I am to be found?"

"In your office, sir." With that the man with the tooth-brush moustache clicked his heels precisely, saluted, and turned to go. But, his eyes still fixed on the other's equipment, he awkwardly hit the trellis with his hand and brought down a shower of the crimson petals all over his senior. Greatly mortified at his clumsiness, he was about to apologise, when the General—he was a general—who had noticed and enjoyed the cause of the perfect staff-officer's discomfiture, remarked kindly—

"Crowned with roses! An omen, I hope. *That* comes of not keeping your eyes in the boat. Yes,"

—he held out rod and book and looked down at himself,—"I am going fishing. I found these lying up in the house, no doubt left on purpose by the worthy owner, and it's a pity to waste them. I am going to take a rest from the office—a rest-cure for us all, eh? You will not find me in my office. You'll find me by the fallen log near the bend, over there,"—he pointed down the garden,—"let me know of any developments at once. By the way, what do you think of this for to-day?" and he gently pulled out of his book something which glistened in the sun and curled itself lovingly round his finger. It looked like a violin-string with a feather on the end of it. He gazed up at the sky. "Too sunny, d'you think?"

"Don't ask me, sir," was the reply, "I'm no fisherman."

The General did not answer: he stood quite still, apparently absorbed in his little book and the specimen he had extracted. He stayed thus for some minutes, staring at his hand and the gaudy little bundle of feather and silk in it, but he did not see them; his gaze was focussed far away, and his face wrinkled in thought. A petal fell on to the book and broke the spell. Starting, he said hastily, as if to excuse his momentary lapse, "Yes, I must have a try for that monster." The effect of the speech, however, was lost, for the other, with mingled feelings of relief and wonder, had noiselessly walked away over the grass and vanished within the house. He was alone.

A kindly-looking man, he had a thoughtful face and usually a gentle manner which were at any rate in great matters rather misleading, for it was his fixed principle of life to endeavour to act on reason and not on impulse. This theory of action was based on an acute sense of proportion. Indeed, so frequently did he preach the importance of proportion in war, that he was commonly known amongst his personal staff as "Old Rule of Three."

Taking off his cap he carefully hooked the fly into the soft green band above the peak. Then he picked up the rod and net and strode almost jauntily down the sloping lawn, his feet rustling through the swathes of cut grass lying about. It possibly may have been owing to the drag of the grass on his feet, for he did not look a robust man, but by the time he had reached a point out of sight of the house there was no spring in his listless steps.

It was July and the garden was looking its best. The shadow of the great cedar on the lawn had almost reached the flower-border near the house where the stocks glowed in the sunlight and filled the air with warm scent. From the house itself, ablaze with purple clematis and climbing roses, the lawn sloped down towards some trees, and through the trees could be seen the sparkle of a river and the shimmering water-meadows beyond. Between borders of aspen and alder flowed the stream, its calm surface only broken here and there by the

rings of a lazily rising fish or by the silvery wake left by some water-vole swimming across. The meadows on the far side and the gentle hillside opposite were bathed in sunlight, and the distant cawing of rooks was the only sound to disturb the afternoon quiet which lay "softer than sleep" over the landscape.

The General passed through the dappled shadows under the trees, and wandered for a short distance up-stream until he came to a little clearing in the shade, where he sat down on a rotting log. Impressed perhaps by the scene, he sat quite still. So motionless was he that a brood of young dabchicks on a voyage of discovery began to peep out from among the broad-leaved weeds near his feet. He did not notice them. His thoughts had again wandered far away and, as his face showed, they were not pleasant.

Suddenly from the dark pool beneath the knotted roots of the hawthorn opposite, where the cloud of midges was dancing, there was a loud liquid "plop." He started. When he looked up he was too late to see anything except a swirl and some quickly-spreading rings on the water, but his apathy disappeared. In one minute his rod was out and fixed; in two the fly was off his cap, and his reel was purring in little shrieks as he hauled out line in great jerks; in three he was crouching back behind an osier, watching his fly spin round in an eddy as it meandered down-stream.

The light on the hill grew more rosy, the

shadows deepened and crept across the water, and yet he fished on—now without hat or coat. The fits of absence of mind or of depression to which he had seemed a prey had quite vanished.

Who would have guessed that this man crouching there in the gloaming was the Commander-in-Chief of a large army, at that moment engaged in one of the greatest battles of history? Indeed, the conflict was now well past the opening gambit, was nearing its final phase, and yet the man responsible for one side was calmly fishing; not only fishing, but evidently miles away from the front. In no way did the fragrant garden or the little stream show the trail of war.

An untrained observer would probably have been moved to indignation that such a thing should be possible; that while the fate of his army hung upon his actions, upon his decisions, the Commander should be engaged in sport; that while hundreds of thousands were fighting and meeting death in its most violent form, or toiling under the most awful strain—that of warfare,—the leader should, with a chosen few, apparently shirk the dangers and hardships and enjoy a secure but ignoble ease. Surely of all human enterprises a battle most needed the presence of the guiding brain on the spot. Even the most luxurious of the successful commanders of history, however great the barbaric splendour of their pomp and state, led their own troops in the combat and showed no lack of personal bravery. Possibly his

verdict would have been that this was only one more sign of the times, an especially glaring example of the growing deterioration of the race and of the decline of the Military Spirit amongst civilised nations.

But it would have been incorrect, for this curious scene was not due to any decrease in national fibre, nor was it due to the irresponsible vagaries of an individual degenerate. It was due to the fact that the advisers of the nation had some acquaintance with modern war and a profound knowledge of the limitations of human nature. The absence of the Commander-in-Chief from the front, his presence at such a spot, the very detachment of his occupation, were part and parcel of a deliberate policy, worked out by the same calculating brains that had worked out the national strategy.

Those who were responsible for the army, perhaps the finest instrument of destruction that the world had ever seen, were well aware that it was an instrument, and not, as it has often been miscalled, a war-machine: that an organisation, from top to bottom of which allowance has continually to be made for the weaknesses of human nature, resembles a machine less than most things. Consequently the material and psychological aspects of the art of war and the action and reaction of the one upon the other were fully recognised. From bugler to generalissimo, for every human being liable to stress, every effort was made to mitigate the results of such stress. This principle

was carried out consistently all through the army, but reached its greatest development in reference to the Commander. In value he did not represent an individual: he represented an army corps, two army corps—who could estimate his value? If the right man in the right place, his brain, his character, his influence were the greatest asset of the nation. It was recognised as essential that the Commander should be in the best physical condition, and it was no part of the scheme that he should share the hardships of the troops, or any hardships. Even at the risk of the sneers of the thoughtless and ignorant, even against his natural tendencies, he was to be preserved from every avoidable danger which might lead to his loss, and from every physical discomfort or exposure which might injure his health and so affect his judgment.

It was recognised that the days when any one man could by personal observation keep a grasp of the progress of the whole of a battle have gone. Modern fights may cover scores of miles, and no one man upon the scene can hope to obtain more than an infinitesimal portion of information by the employment of his own senses. Even if at the front, he would be dependent for any comprehensive view of events upon intelligence conveyed from other portions of the field. Indeed, the closer to the front the less in amount would he see, though what did come within his view might be very clear—probably far too clear. However well trained and experienced a general, he does not

fight great actions every day, and would be liable, to the detriment perhaps of the main issue, to be influenced unduly by the near proximity of really minor events of which he should happen to be an eyewitness.

Indeed, were there not cases recorded where commanders, who should have been thinking in scores of thousands, had allowed their judgment to be warped by the fate of mere hundreds or dozens — actually witnessed? Better, therefore, that the Commander should receive all his information and be placed in a position where he could reduce it to a common denominator and weigh the whole, uninfluenced by personal knowledge of any separate portion of it. It is a question of mental optics: for the larger picture is required the longer focus. Isolation from sight does not mean isolation from immediate information, and it can be better acted on if received in an undisturbed place.

These considerations were thought to outweigh the objection against them that men will fight better for a General whom they can see—a well-known figure—than for one who remains aloof, safe in the rear, a vague personality. It was argued that the actual presence of the Commander has not its former well proved moral value, for he can at best only be in one small section, where his presence may be known to a few: that the men of huge conscript armies have not that personal affection for the Chief which used to be the case, and

that his presence or absence would not influence them to the same extent even if they knew of it. Provided that their Chief organises victories, the men will worship him whether they see him or not. There was indeed one objection to this theory of the detachment of the thinking brain from the actual combat. When this brain is linked to a highly strung temperament, it may be more disturbed by the pictures evoked by the imagination than by anything that could be actually seen.

It was partially so in this case. The man fishing was fully in agreement with these principles, but did not find them easy to carry into execution. To keep away from the front in itself needed a continuous strain. It needed far more moral courage than to lead the troops, for was it not certain to be misunderstood of many? Though he realised that a large part of his duty lay in maintaining himself fit and calm, and though he was trying loyally to keep his mind detached for the big questions, it was an effort both for him and his staff—hence the false note noticeable in the interview in the garden, and his strange reveries when alone. Even he, with his trained mind and experience, almost a faddist in his sense of proportion, could not keep his thoughts from the struggle being waged miles away. Everything was arranged, and his time for action would not come till his great enveloping, flanking movement now behind the enemy made itself felt, and yet he was worrying in spite of himself. He was conscious of be-

ginning to interfere and to fuss his subordinates in their work. He was equally conscious of the fatal results of such a course. Hence the borrowing of the fishing-tackle.

Though an ardent fisherman, it was not until the big trout rose that he obtained the mental distraction he sought. Then all thoughts of war, battle, envelopment, and possibilities left him in a flash, and his mind rested while he pitted his skill against the cunning of the fish—an old veteran himself. His present duty was to keep his own mind clear, and not cloud the minds of his subordinates. He was trying to do it.

III.

Meanwhile the map-room on the ground-floor at the side of the house facing the trees was, much to the annoyance of its occupants, already growing dark. In it four officers were working, also coatless and absorbed, though not quite so pleasantly occupied as their General, whipping the stream down below. Two of them were standing up, reading aloud at intervals from pieces of paper, and two were sprawling on all-fours over a map laid out on the floor. Occasionally a non-commissioned officer brought in a fresh budget of papers. The map, too large to be hung up, was mounted on linoleum or some similar material which held the pins of the coloured flags with

which it was studded. According to the intelligence read out, the two men on the floor moved the flags or stuck in fresh ones. Their attitude was somewhat undignified for the Brain of an army. It needed no glance at the green patches on the coats hung over the pictures to show that these four were officers of the Great General Staff, for they addressed each other by their Christian names or more often as "Old boy," a sign in all civilised armies of the freemasonry and co-ordination of thought acquired by young staff-officers who have been contemporaries at the war schools. All juniors, they were now, in a military sense, only deviling.

The atmosphere of the room was not only warm; it appeared somewhat electrically charged. There was little conversation, much grunting, and many a muttered oath from the crawlers. The only man who talked was a stout fellow whose garments were strained to the limit of elasticity—if not to breaking-point—by his position. As he stretched to place a flag and then crouched back to the edge of the map, his fleshy neck was forced against his collar and bulged out in a roll from which the short hair stood out like bristles from a brush. He was certainly stout, but, far from being choleric, appeared the most cheerful of the party. At last he looked up.

"All done?"

"Yes, for a bit," was the reply of the man who had been reading out to him, so he at once heaved

himself up with surprising agility, and, adjusting his collar, mopped his forehead with a bandana handkerchief of exotic hues.

"I say, old boy, it's gettin' beastly dark. What about a light, eh?" He looked up at the swinging oil-lamp in the centre of the ceiling.

"You are always wanting something," snapped the sour-faced man near the door. "It's barely dark yet. Orderly!"

A soldier appeared, and the lamp was lighted with some difficulty owing to the position of the map. The light showed up the faces of the party all shining with heat, and all, except the fat man's, worried in expression. His was round, and, though now congested from unwonted exertion, was eminently good-humoured. He looked the type of person who proposes "The Ladies," and always shouts "One cheer more," on principle.

"Phew," he whistled; "it's hot!"

Quite unabashed by the absolute lack of response he ran on: "But the job 's nearly over! I say, what would you fellows say if you heard the tinkle of ice against glass comin' along the passage now, and if a charming wench appeared with a tray full of long tumblers, big green beakers of Bohemian glass full to the brim of hock cup,—bubbles rocketin' up and clingin' round the ice and cucumber and winkin' at you? Eh?" He made a guzzling and indescribably vulgar sound with his lips, indicative of lusciousness.

"Why the Bohemian glass? Why hock cup?

Give me beer, beer in a mug or a bucket, and a child could play with me."

"Confound it! Shut up both of you!" said a third in exasperation. "How the devil can we do this if you will talk? Thank Heaven, here is some more stuff coming. That will keep you busy for a bit." As he spoke a fresh budget of papers was brought in. The fat man turned to his former reader—

"Your turn to squirm, I think, old boy. Down you go, and this hero will intone for a bit. Interestin' work this: we are certainly in the know, and should be able to look at things dispassionately enough: but it is hardly responsible. We might as well be lickin' stamps or——"

"Oh, for the Lord's sake keep quiet," repeated the same officer as before.

"All right, all right. It's lucky some of us can put a cheerful face on matters. What's the good of lookin' like a lot of mutes, even if it is to be our own funeral? Besides me, the only true philosopher in this army is old Rule of Three himself, with his eternal cry of 'Proportion, gentlemen! Proportion!'—God bless him!"

"He's been ratty enough the last few hours. I don't know what's come over him," one growled without looking up. "He's been fussing and worriting like any other man."

"Yes, he has," was the reply. "But it's only been while he has been waiting, with nothing to do, for the moment of the general advance. Any-

way, he's let *us* alone this sweaty afternoon. I wonder what he's been after."

There was no reply, and the work continued with intervals of waiting for messages and occasional interludes of grumbling, for even in this sheltered spot there were drawbacks. Perhaps a hand was placed on the point of a flag-pin, or one of the candles—stuck in bottles all round the edge of the floor in order to obviate the heavy shadow cast by the crawling men's bodies—was kicked over by a careless heel.

The stout officer went on reading items of news in a steady voice, while his companion either made some alteration or did not, according to the information received.

"Two batteries of the 25th Artillery Brigade and three battalions of the—somethin' Brigade—I can't read the number,—I wish the devil they'd write their numbers instead of puttin' figures," he continued in a monotone.

"Well?" said the flagger.

"It may be a three or it may be a five; I can't tell which," was the casual reply.

"Yes; but what *is* it? What has happened?"

"Practically wiped out," in a calm voice.

"Where?"

"Near the bridge—there, square F 17,—by your hand, yes, that's it."

The flagger carefully examined his flags. "It can't be the third or the fifth: they are miles away. Is the place correct?"

"Yes; there's no mistake—'south of bridge,' it says."

"Then it must be the twenty-first, or the fifteenth, or—hold on—what's this?—the eighth brigade? The eighth is near the bridge; yes, of course it must be the eighth,—an eight and a three——"

"My God!" was the startling interruption from the reader.

All those in the room looked up; but they were so accustomed to the speaker's garrulity that they made no remark. His tone and his expression, however, quite spoilt the *rôle* of philosopher which he had claimed; his mouth was gaping, and he was feeling his collar nervously.

The flagger waited some time silently: he wanted facts. "Well, let's have it," he said finally.

"Old boy, it's awful!"

"Yes, of course it is; but it is no more awful than crowds of other messages that we have been getting. After all, what are two batteries and three battalions? Look at this!"—he pointed to a large mass of their own flags well round behind one flank of the enemy's position. "They must just be beginning to feel it now. They're beginning to feel something nibbling at them behind, as it were."

"Yes, yes, that's all right enough; but this news—man—my regiment—that brigade—my own battalion!"

There was a chorus of sympathetic noises, varying from words to mere whistling.

"But your battalion may be the one which escaped."

"Not a chance of it. You don't know my battalion, or the old Colonel. He always was a perfect devil to be in the thick of things, and he will have been in the thick of this. Poor old chap!—poor fellows! And I here all the time! It's awful!" He blew his nose hard several times. The flagger did nothing. As a matter of fact, he was waiting in sympathetic silence for the other to complete the message. He felt for him; indeed he himself might be the next to hear that the unit in which he had, in a military sense, been born and bred had been destroyed.

"Well, man! Why the deuce don't you move the flags?" said the late philosopher.

"I am waiting for more. So far there's no reason for moving anything."

"No *reason!* Good God! what more do you want? Two whole batteries! Three whole battalions! *My* batt——"

The thick stuttering tones were cut short by a voice from the open French window. The General was standing there calm and smiling. Over one arm he carried his coat; from the other hand hung some glistening object. Voices had been so raised that none of those in the room had heard him come up, and, astonished at his appearance and

fascinated by this object, which appeared to be a fish, they remained open-mouthed, silent.

"What is it?" he repeated.

He was informed.

"Where?"

"Just stand clear," he continued, and from the spot pointed out his gaze swept slowly over the whole battle area until it finally rested on the mass of flags representing his great flanking movement. With his right hand, from which hung a two-pound trout, he pointed to it, and said quietly—

"Proportion, gentlemen! Proportion! No! it's not worth moving a flag."

# When Dog Eats Dog.

"The end justifies the means."

"HAVEN'T you got a chock or some ends, sergeant?"

"No, no a bittock. I ha'e ma orrders and you ha'e yours."

"But, quartermaster-sergeant, we have no fuel at all now. 'Twas Sergeant Jones himself told us to ask if you couldn't spare us an old sleeper?"

"I ken fine whae sent you here. Fuel or no fuel, ye'll just have to lump it."

"But Sergeant Jones——"

"Awa' wi' you and yer Sergeant Jones! He kens aboot the poseetion of affairs as well as I do masel'. Oot ye gang: I canna ha'e ye speirin' aboot all the mornin'. How many times d'ye need tellin'? Bring in a requiseetion signed by the captain and ye'll get as much as he chooses to vouch for. Oot you get, a' the lot o' ye; I won't have you sappers prowling round my yarrd."

Three scarecrows in khaki shambled away from the railway storekeeper's office grumbling. The storekeeper was quite correct: they were on the prowl, and what they were prowling for was wood or anything else which would burn.

The office was a cosy corner between three stacks of sleepers some eight feet high, over which a railway tarpaulin was stretched. The 'paulin was spoil of war, and had painted on it, in letters eighteen inches high, O.V.S., which stood for "Oranje Vrijstaat Spoorweg." The lettering came at the back behind the packing-case table, and the "O" and the "S" were just visible on each side of the head of Quartermaster-Sergeant John M'Gowan as he sat on his drum of paint. This office was M'Gowan's sanctum, in which he kept all his records, ledgers, vouchers, and small stores. It smelt horribly of red-lead, tarpaulin, and creosoted sleepers, but, after all, this was a clean, almost an antiseptic, odour, suggestive of sea breezes, blue water, and Home, far pleasanter and more healthy than any of the hundred and one other smells which assailed the nostril in the pestilential camp. Also there was shade in here from the South African sun and an absence of that almost continuous swirl of dust which reigned all round outside. Over the field of mealie stalks in which the office stood the dust-devils eddied orange-red, charged with mealie straw and particles of forage; farther down the river-bed they were white and grey, loaded with ashes and still worse. Though there were no actual dust-clouds in the office, yet the wind took its revenge on the sacrilegious sapper who had dared to create a haven of rest in its own devil's playground. It would wait until a sufficient charge had collected in the creases of the tarpaulin or in

the interstices between the sleepers, and then, with an extra effort, flap would go the tarpaulin, and "pouf!" a concentrated shower of grit and sand would fill the hair and eyes of the enemy or pour down his neck. Yes, there were drawbacks even in this comfortable spot, but the occupant did not much mind.

He was a tough specimen of the old school, and was not easily put out or upon. In his own noble corps he was admitted to be a hard case—generally expressed in soldier circles by saying that it would be a very small animal that could make a living off John M'Gowan. He gave and demanded nothing for nothing, and a bawbee to him was capital. As he sat there, making out lists in duplicate, triplicate, or quadruplicate, among the countless issue and receipt vouchers and requisition forms hung upon wires or weighted under spanners and various tools, he was in his element. With grizzled hair and stubbly chin, and with pockets of dust collected beneath his eyes and in every wrinkle of his face, he appeared almost entirely drab. One exception was his mouth, which, sad to confess, was stained with tobacco-juice, for he had again taken to a long discarded and somewhat unpleasant habit. Tobacco was scarce and smoking was not an economical method of using it, besides necessitating matches. His very teeth were now quite brown. One of them was missing, and the gap did not add to John's personal appearance, though it had its conveniences to a man addicted to chew-

ing. There were also several splashes of a brilliant purple on his hands and face, for everything had to be written in indelible pencil, and the weather was hot. Had the odour of creosote been at all suggestive of incense, the worthy quartermaster-sergeant might, with his grey face, stained mouth, and purple spots, have been taken for an idol in its shrine.

While the three sappers slouched away discontentedly past the stacks of sleepers and other stores surrounded by barbed wire, John sat on sweating and checking vouchers. He took turn and turn about with a hapless corporal in what he termed "calling over." This consisted in interminable lists of stores being read aloud by one and ticked off by the other. During the storekeeper's turn of intoning, his suffering subordinate was almost maddened by the dreary sing-song voice which ended each item in a whine. The wind howled over the ashpit of a river-bed, the grit rattled on the roof, an occasional dust geyser smote him fairly in the eyes or neck, and hundreds of nasty-looking flies played a furious game of "touch last" among the purple spots on his forehead, but John did not stop. He prided himself on the fact that nothing left him that had not been read over at least once. Best of non-coms., prince of storekeepers, what mattered to him the destruction of a brigade as compared with the deficiency of a bolt?

Meanwhile the three sappers slunk away over to

the other side of the railway line. They belonged to the relief then off duty, and the urgency of their need was proved by their wasting valuable spare time in trying to wheedle timber out of Quartermaster-Sergeant M'Gowan instead of resting.

"It's like trying to squeeze blood out of a blooming stone!" said one as they reached the "cook-house"—two lengths of rail just raised off the ground. There were several camp-kettles about, but only one actually on the rails; underneath this a struggling spark of fire was being kept alive by the unremitting attention of the cook, who, sprawling on all-fours, with blackened face about three inches from the kettle, blew hard and teased the smouldering rubbish with a piece of wire. He was no philosopher this black-faced sapper, and no believer in the economics of force or the conservation of energy, for he expended as much breath and effort in swearing between his blasts as he did in blowing. He looked up at the three unsuccessful foragers. As he wiped his streaming eyes with a piece of grey material, possibly handkerchief, probably waste, his attitude was one of not too sanguine inquiry.

The leader of the three only shook his head, it was too sickening for words, but the man behind him made the result of the mission beyond possible error. He snarled:

"No, not a n'end, not a n'arf, not a n'andful of blooming sawdust."

The cook knelt up. Its appearance proved how

difficult a task it is to blacken the face nicely when the eyes are streaming. Then he spoke:

"Quartermaster-Sergeant M'Gowan is the——" But his description was cut short by the arrival of the remainder of the mess.

"Wot? Dinner not up?"

"Naao! and you'll get nothing 'ot but your corfy to-day, and that won't be 'ot!"

"Wot? Cold bully again?"

"Yes." He got up and looked in the kettles off the fire. "We drew as nice a fresh joint of trek-ox as ever I seen on this campaign this morning; but—what's the good without a fire?"

There was a look of dismay. It was a stifling day in spite of the wind,—a day when one might have thought that a dainty cold lunch of a slice off the breast and some salad, with a glass of white wine, would have been infinitely preferable to a heavy hot meal. But these tired and hungry men did not want to toy with a light luncheon: this was their principal—their only solid meal. Besides, they were going to get no slices off the breast or salad. They were going to get tinny, stringy bully-beef, such as they had eaten for weeks, and, ah! the charm of a hot meal after a prolonged course of cold bully. Moreover, they were not going to get white wine or anything cold; they were going to drink a hot or warmish liquid,—not, perhaps, the ideal beverage for the climate—but to drink the unboiled water of the river was too much even for the unimaginative

British soldier. There had been some fighting near the bridge a few days before, and the sickly, sweet odour wafted up from the river-bed even as far as this spot, and the clouds of flies hovering in spite of the wind, told their tale of dead animals. Soldiers are not such fools as they are sometimes made out, and they preferred their warm reputed coffee, hot though the weather was, to water from the sparkling brook. The quite excusable look of dismay on the faces of the last-comers irritated the lachrymose *chef*.

"Wot's the good of looking reproachful at me? It's that blooming psalm-singing, tobacco-chewing, voucher-snatching old image sitting there so snug under his 'paulin that you've got to blame. If you want hot joints, if you want veg', arsk him! He's got the fuel—mountings of it—all creosoted ready to burn. If any of you had the pluck of a louse you would 'ave pinched some of them sleepers long ago, and would not look so bloomin' glum cos I can't do you a chump chop off the silver-grill with me bit of rail and me cow-dung and dust fire!" He sniffed as he finished his speech, and rubbed the tip of his nose almost round to a right-angle with the back of his hand. "I'm fed up!"

"Oh, all right, cookie; we're not blaming you!" said the man addressed, in a tone of mollification. "It ain't your fault, we know."

There was silence for some time as the bully and biscuit was shared out and eaten. They ate and drank moodily and sparingly; they had been hard

at work all the morning since dawn and were uncommunicative. After the meal was over they congregated in the shade under the long line of loaded trucks in the siding and smoked. Some lit half-smoked pipes, others produced bits of cigarette, a few actually filled their pipes afresh.

"Here you are, cookie," and a whole unbent cigarette was tossed to him. For a few moments all was peace, and one or two men put their hats over their eyes and dozed. A ruminative voice from under a hat broke the silence.

"Yes, he's a tough nut and no error, is old John. Must save the British Government millions of money—that class of man. We'll do him in yet though, somehow, or my name's not Thomas Arthur Eden. Why, he has sleepers enough to relay the whole line from Cape Town. But he's a careful man; won't even help his own corps. Heard what he did at home in camp last year?"

There was a sleepy chorus of negatives.

The speaker sat up. "We used to go down to camp every summer, and M'Gowan was quartermaster-sergeant in charge of camp stores, drew 'em, issued 'em, cleaned up when we left, and all that. Well, we used to leave a lot of heavy stuff down there every year instead of carting it away—standing camp, you know. The cooking-stoves and such like were stored in a tin hut and locked up. So afraid was old M'Gowan that village children might come and steal his blooming stoves—all covered with tallow and whitening and weighing all of half a ton

each — that he wasn't satisfied with locking the doors of the store. He puts bars to the windows, wedges and screws up the door every year.

"Last year he was ordered away, and didn't go down to take over his own stores as usual. The party as went down had a fine benefit of it. When they arrived at the camp they couldn't get into the blessed hut at all. If you believe me, not only had old John wedged and screwed up the door with coach-screws, he had countersunk the screws, puttied the holes and painted over the putty!"

There was a roar of laughter.

"Yes, and we had to cut our way into the shed through the corrugated iron! The quartermaster was not too well pleased. He got properly told off for the delay, and you bet that old John got his bit passed on all right."

"Did they charge him damages?"

"No—I don't think, because the cunning old coon had made a map of the door showing all the screw-holes, and had given this to a corporal who'd lost it. There was not much getting round him. He'd got this plan in duplicate, if you please, and produced the tracing of it initialled by the Major. He's a fair caution."

"'E's bound to be. 'Oo ever met a Mac that wasn't cautious. Why, there's that celebrated cunning man I've 'eard tell of in 'istory — an ambassador or something. 'Is name began with Mac. Wot wos it? Mac—Mac—ear—something."

"I know—MacEarvelly."

"That's right—MacEarvelly."

I thought he was an Eyetalian."

"Eyetalian? Chuck it! Whoever 'eard of an Eyetalian whose name began with Mac? You'll be saying that bagpipes are Dutch or verminsilly's Scotch soon."

There was distinct opposition to the theory of the Italian origin of the author of 'The Prince.'

"Well, Scotch, Eyetalian, or Chinese, I should like to do the old blighter in—starving his own corps like this. Hullo, here comes Charlie. Wot 'o, Charlie!"

A man in shirt-sleeves, with something under his arm, joined the group. "Wot 'o!" was his reply to the greeting.

"Wot'cher got there?"

"An end."

"How did you get that?"

"Pinched it off No. 3 crib."

"Would 'ave done us a treat for the fire two hours ago," said the cook. "It'll do for to-morrow."

The man who knew of Machiavelli got up, walked across to Charlie, took the sleeper end, and looked at it impressively.

"'Ere, 'old 'ard," he said, "'*old* 'ard."

"What's up? That's a sleeper end, that is. Never seen one before, old son?" There was more laughter, for the impressive manner of examining the block and the tone of voice were hardly warranted.

"That's right. That's a sleeper end——"

"God bless it!" was the interruption. But the impressive man had the centre of the stage, and was not to be put off. He continued solemnly:

"That's a sleeper end right enough, and it's going to breed."

There was silence at this cryptic statement.

"Yes, it is. I've got a plan."

"So's Kroojer. Let's 'ave it."

The mysterious one took his pipe out of his mouth, pressed the dottle down carefully with an empty cartridge-case, replaced the pipe, and proceeded.

"We want fuel, don't we?"

"Yes."

"Wot's the most likely fuel, and the best?"

"Sleepers, of course. Out with it. Get it off your chest."

"Can we get 'em?"

"No. Come orf of it. What are you getting at?"

"Who stops us getting sleepers?"

"Quartermaster-sergeant."

"How?"

"He keeps 'em in stacks, and keeps a careful tally."

"Why can't we pinch one off the top of a stack?"

"'Cos he's arranged them in a pattern, and has got 'is bloomin' masonic marks and check-signs all over the top."

"Right-o! Now—" he waved his pipe in a half circle, and leaning forward lowered his voice to a confidential whisper—"what *I* want to know is: why can't we take one out of the bottom of the stack, eh?"

"You're shooting your mouth off, Bert. Wot, pull out a sleeper with all that weight on top? You're talking out of the back of your neck."

The orator felt behind his collar as if to test the truth of this statement, but really to pause for effect. "Shooting my mouth orf, am I?" He stopped, and a look of immense contempt came over his face as he felt he was again holding his audience. "Are you sappers or blooming gardeners? Wot 'ave we got jacks for? Wot about them 'ydraulic jacks and screw-jacks? Wot's the good of being Royal Engineers and supplied with every luxury, eh? Talk of lifting that weight?" —he stopped to expectorate—"why, we could lift ten blooming stacks! You're gardeners, that's what you are; landscape gardeners!"

This insult was too much. While they were swallowing it and cogitating over the hint given to them, the men were silent. It was Sandy who broke the silence: "Mon, Bert, you're a deevil."

"Yes, that's right enough," another added; "but what about old John? He's prowling round all the time."

"The nights are dark, aren't they?"

"Yes; but he prowls a lot at night."

The genius was momentarily stumped, but it was

not for long. Again the look of contempt came over his face: "Yes; and what is Sandy here for with the 'To and From' that he found in the farm? It's ordained, I tell you. You know how old John likes music. Wot's the matter with Scotty Sandy and two or three chaps giving him a sing-song every evening to amuse him while the others do their bit with the jack at one of the stacks and pull out a sleeper?"

This clinched matters and there was no reply, until the bugler, a pale youth with many hairy moles on his face, said: "Arf a mo'. That won't help us. It's all very well, but the Q.M.S. will see the hole next morning, and he jolly well knows that it ain't the infantry or cavalry that carries jacks to lift up 'is stacks. He'll bring it 'ome to us sure enough. No, I'm not for it; I ain't forgot what Snobby Jones got lars' week. You know what the Major said yesterday about touching the stores? Not 'arf. I ain't agoin——"

He was constrained to stop by the concentrated look of scorn directed upon him by Bert. The latter looked him up and down and sighed.

"Well, Sprouts, this beats all. We'll 'ave to go back to first principles, as the Major always says before he deals out 168 hours' hard." He stepped towards the end of the sleeper which had been the cause of the discussion and picked it up: "What you think give me the idea? Wot is the key to the whole scheme?—why, *this*—look at it; ain't it the same as any other sleeper end? 'Oo's going to

tell it's only eighteen inches long? Can't we——?" He stopped; the look of intelligence on the faces of his audience showed him they had arrived. He shrugged his shoulders. "Some people don't know enough to come in out of the rain. Savvy now, eh? This sleeper end is going to produce one sleeper *per diem* so long as we want it!"

But the bugler, "Sprouts," was not so soon demolished. "That's all very well: it sounds easy *for the first time.* You jacks up the stack, pulls out your sleeper, and puts the end in its place. *So* far, *so* good; but your sleeper end is done. What about the second time and the third and the rest? I don't see where the *per diem* comes in?"

"Love a duck, some people is thick," was the reply. "If you can't see that—perhaps there's others who will explain?"

"Chuck it, Sprouts," volunteered another. "It's all right. 'Aving one sleeper to the good, we can cut the end orf that for the second edition, and so on till Kingdom come. It's the end we 'ave got as does the trick." The speaker turned to his audience: "Bert 'as got a bull's-eye this time. I'm for it. If any one sees a crab let 'im 'ave it out now." He looked around. No one had a "crab," and until the men fell in for the afternoon's work they discussed ways and means. Bert presided at the council of war, as befitted the strategist and thinker.

That night three figures strolled casually up to

the Store Office and politely suggested a little music to the overworked occupant. He was nothing loth. Music, especially Scotch airs, was his weakness.

"Aweel, I don't mind a bittie chune for twa-three meenits," he said, coming out of his den and sitting down on a keg. "How's she going yonder?" jerking his thumb over in the direction of the bridge, from which distant hammering could be heard. He rather wondered at the politeness all the same: he was a man who looked for motives.

"None so badly. We've moved up Number Three, and they're getting the stringers out over Four and Five spans now. The Captain was very pleased with our shift, said we could have any spare bits of stuff lying about, but devil a bit was there!"

The hint did not get a rise.

"Well, what is't to be, quartermaster-sergeant?" said Sandy, as he stretched the "To and From" to full howl and squeezed out a preliminary whine. This instrument was a dilapidated though originally fine German concertina which had been found in a deserted farm. Some stops were missing, and the wind hissed out of the holes in the leather, temporarily patched with pieces of tobacco-pouch and the indiarubber solution carried for important electric work; but it gave forth wheezy music of a sort in its player's skilful hands.

"Gie us 'Annie Laurie,'" said M'Gowan, and "Annie Laurie" it was, the storekeeper joining in the refrain at the end of each verse.

No sooner had the music struck up than a mysterious noise—"Crrrrk—crrrrk—crrrrk"—was heard above the more distant sounds at the bridge. The sappers kicked each other and winked in the darkness. The Q.M.S. made no remark until the last notes of the air had died away in a wheeze. He then said sharply: "What's that leeftin' jack daein' yonder?"

"What jack, quartermaster-sergeant?" in a surprised tone.

"Mon, d'ye no hear that? There—there!"

"Oh, that! That's no jack: that's Corporal Smith's gang on the ratchet-brace—they're drilling rails."

"Drilling rrails? What gars them drill rrails up here? Gin I were yon corrporal I'd wake up the man using a rratchet like yon. It's as slow as——"

"Yes—they're a lazy lot, quartermaster-sergeant," was the reply, as Sandy again burst forth into hasty melody.

Several songs were now sung without a pause. Then silence ensued, and the creaking noise became painfully clear. The storekeeper could not let the subject rest.

"De'il a bit of a rrachet-drill. Yon's a jack!"

"What about that bagpipe thing you were playing the other night, Sandy?" said one by inspiration.

"Which?" said Sandy.

"You know—you called it a 'Something Rock.'"

"Oo-ay—it's the pibroch you mean."

"That's right, The Peabrock. Give us it. The quartermaster-sergeant hasn't heard that."

Then from the wounded instrument gushed forth the weirdest imitation of the pipes that was ever heard. The drone was a bit jerky as the concertina was pulled in and out, but the chanter was realistic to a degree. The music had the desired effect.

"I mind the last time I heard that," said the victim; "'twas in Glen Tilt, an' the Duke's aen pipers playin'."

"Ay," said Sandy, "I ken Glen Tilt mysel'," and he was just preparing to give reminiscences to any extent when from the other side of the line there rang out distinctly "Ting-Tang-Ting" — three strokes of a hammer on a suspended piece of rail. The creaking had ceased.

"What's yon?" inquired M'Gowan.

"We must go," was the reply; "it's our signal."

"Ye're no for shift to-night?"

"No, but the corporal wants us for a job of work."

"Good-night, quartermaster-sergeant; give you some more to-morrow."

They all got up.

"Good-night."

They were actually leaving without giving the last artistic touch to their *rôle*. It was the piper

who remembered. He turned round: "Ye'll no be ha'ein' a spare bittock o'——?"

"No, I have not," said the irate M'Gowan. He now saw the motive for all this excessive politeness, and was vexed at having unbent as far as he had—it was only to get something out of him; but he certainly would have missed this daily, almost hourly question.

The sappers nudged each other as they went off. With another resigned "Good-night" they vanished silent-footed over the soft sand, while the concertina insulted the night with imitations of a donkey's braying. The storekeeper turned into his den, and lighting a very dirty piece of candle started poring over his ledgers again.

Two hundred yards away a couple of men were frantically sawing a two-foot length off a hardwood sleeper. When the minstrels returned this had been sawn off and was being buried, and the rest of the timber was being split up. The only man who was doing no actual work was Bert.

"Did 'e guess?" asked the latter.

"Not 'e. 'E 'eard the noise all right, but we 'eaded 'im orf. Kidded 'im it was a ratchet-drill! 'E thinks 'e knows why we give 'im the music; thinks we want to suck up to 'im for timber, and 'e's 'uggin' 'imself at seein' through us!"

There was subdued laughter.

"So long as 'e's got something to think 'e's cute over 'e won't trouble us," replied Bert. "Let 'im

'ug 'imself! But we must muffle that jack to-morrow with a bit of sacking. It was no more like a ratchet than I am."

For the remaining days of their stay at this spot the squad ate hot dinners, in the gaining of which all lent a hand except the strategist. As he would say in a self-satisfied tone when urged to do his bit with the rest—

"Me 'elp? Not much! 'Oo 'ave you got to thank for this, eh? Them as 'as brains hasn't got to do manewal labour. *You* work with yer 'ands: I work with me 'ead. *I* organise: *I* command: *you* carry out—I'm the MacEarvelly of this little lot! I do what we call staff-work in the army. That's about the size of it, old pals, see? Wot 'o!"

. . . . . .

The construction train had puffed away to other scenes of wreckage, and in it this particular squad with its MacEarvelly, its black-faced *chef*, and its "To and From." The storekeeper's little home was demolished, and all the stuff was being loaded into a long line of trucks by gangs of noisy Kaffirs. Close to a fast-vanishing pile of sleepers which had got down to its bottom layer stood Quartermaster-Sergeant John M'Gowan, Royal Engineers. He was looking at a gap in the bottom of the stack—a gap now as visible as that in his own teeth. He kicked a short end of sleeper out of its place at the edge of the pile, picked it up and looked at the fresh saw-cut, scratching his damp head

absently with the business end of the indelible pencil.

"The deevils," he murmured, "the pairfect deevils wi' their rrachet-brace and their music and what not. Royal Horrse, Royal Field, and all Arrtillery, Cavalry, Infantry, and Deparrtments, I can haud ma' ain wi' them a', but the Lord presairve me from ma' ain corrps,—and Jarrah sleepers at top prrices, too!"

He turned away sadly. He had not gone ten paces before he chuckled: "Whae's like us? God bless us!"

# The Limit.

"For every man shall bear his own burden."
—St Paul.

"
This they all with a joyful mind
Bear through life like a torch in flame,
And falling fling to the host behind
Play up, play up and play the game."
—Henry Newbolt.

There was the sound of a man spitting, followed by bad language. Out of the darkness ten yards away there came—"Hullo, what's up?"

"I was just going to curl up here; thought it was a pile of straw; but it's the corner of a pig-sty or a manure heap—(sniff). I don't know which, I can't see."

"You're too particular. This isn't a bed of violets exactly, but it's straw anyway, fairly dry, with a roof on top, and room for two. Come across here." A scuffling noise over the cobble-stones as of a man walking in one boot followed.

"Mind your head—*and* my rifle! That's it, to the right."

With a rustle and clatter some one sat down and grunted—

"That's better."

He fumbled in his haversack and pulled out a pipe which he filled. Putting it between his lips he sucked at it — unlit — solemnly. It was foul and wheezed at every pull.

"Match?" said the other. "I've still got a few, but I've no baccy. I'll swop a light for a fill."

"Right-o! Give us your hand." No pouch was passed—the men were strangers,—but a load of tobacco was pressed into the outstretched palm. There was a pause.

"Ready?"

"Ay."

The match was struck with care and shielded between a pair of hollowed hands. One after the other the pipe-bowls were inserted and the flame was drawn down on to the glowing tobacco in a long tongue. Released between each draw it blazed up momentarily and cast enough light to show two soldiers sitting on a heap of straw under a lean-to roof which was in a corner of a yard against a barn-like building. Round the enclosure was a low wall, and in the other corners were some vague heaps and rough sheds. Barely had the light of the match flared up finally after the pipes were alight than a hoarse voice was heard from over the wall on the right: "Here, hold hard, don't chuck it away," and two more soldiers, almost falling over the wall into the circle of light, scrambled up over the damp

cobble-stones just in time to make use of the last flicker. With a word of thanks they again vanished.

Besides showing up the two men on the straw, the match had lasted long enough to show that one of them was wearing only one boot, the other foot was bandaged. This man had noticed that the number on the other's shoulder-strap was not that of any regiment in his brigade.

"Hullo. What are you doing here? Lost yourself?"

The reply was given slowly and in jerks between puffs of smoke.

"Yes; mounted man; sent back with message yesterday; tried to rejoin my regiment; horse shot; couldn't get a remount; ordered to join nearest force—this brigade. I struck your regiment; here I am—infantry!'

"Where's your own lot?"

"Miles away on the flank.'

"Been with us all day?"

"Yes, since last night."

"Then you've helped to attack this place?"

"Yes."

"Many down your side?"

"Heaps."

"Ah! I wonder how long we shall have here?"

"All night, I suppose, unless they attack us. That's why we've been doing all this work fortifying the place since we got in. What's your job been?"

The other did not speak. He gently slapped the blade of a small shovel which was dangling by his side. The speaker continued.

"I haven't got one. I've been making loopholes with my bayonet—had nothing else. I carried out orders; but please God some one knows what the loopholes fire on—I don't. It was dark when we started work; but it strikes me that if we use them we shall be shooting our own men in the back."

"Dessay: things are bound to be in a bit of a mess when you get a place at night. Why did you come in here? What put you on to this straw? The yard don't smell too nice."

"To get out of the wind; and I guessed there might be some straw that wasn't sopping under the lee of this barn-place," said the mounted man.

"I tried the barn first; but, once I got inside, the look of the roof against the sky was enough. Our guns must have got on to it pretty often. The whole show may tumble in any moment. I expect it is full of their dead, too."

"But there's quite a crowd of our fellows in there now."

"I know. It's warm inside, and dry; and some of 'em are so fed up they don't care a damn what happens."

There was no more conversation for some time. The glow of the pipes, however, and the rustle of the straw as the men fidgeted, showed that they

were not sleeping. They ought to have fallen asleep at once, for they were tired out, having marched far and fought hard during the two previous days. They were taking part in a large attack—successful as far as they were concerned, in that they had gained possession of the village for which they had been fighting all day. After the enemy had been finally driven out of the place there had still been much to do in strengthening it against any possible effort at recapture. Though otherwise unimportant, it was a stepping-stone for the morrow's advance. The wearied men had been digging, knocking holes in walls, driving in stakes, and struggling in the dark with obstinate and savage barbed wire until the night was far advanced. They had then been allowed to feed and rest wherever they could find shelter near their position. Not many besides the wounded were in buildings, for the firing line was on the outer fringe of the village, some way from the houses. It was in tool-sheds, yards, barns, cow-houses, and sties that the lucky ones got shelter. The rest were out in the open. Though the temperature was not really low, the night seemed cold to the sweat-soaked soldiers who had been fighting and crawling all day in the sun. Moreover, they were wet; for it was under cover of a rainstorm that they had at last succeeded in rushing the place at dusk. Pursuit in the dark with tired infantry being out of the question, they had just to hang on to what they had won.

To men in such a condition, who had no roof over their heads, the chance of a straw bed out of the wind had outweighed such a trifle as the overwhelming farm-yard smell which hung round behind the barn. The two chance comrades did not sleep, but neither spoke for some time for fear of waking the other. At last the infantry soldier turned over. As he did so he groaned aloud and swore.

"Eh?" grunted his companion.

"Rubbed foot: slung me boot round me neck yesterday; lost it to-day crawling, and a job I've had to dodge the medical officer. The infernal thing throbs so now that I can't sleep."

"No more can I. My rheumatism or lumbago or whatever it is gives me devilish little chance. I lie awake, smoke,—when I have baccy,—and think."

"Yes, there's a lot of us do a bit of thinking these days. Been a surprise to most of us this show." From his conversation it was evident that the speaker, though not a man of good birth or much education, was of a superior class. He rarely dropped an "h." There was no response from the other, and he proceeded:

"In the first place, I never dreamt these —— could fight so well." He used a common but coarse nickname for the enemy.

"Why not?"

"They're not serving voluntarily—they're con-

scripts! I was always told that one volunteer was worth——"

"I know that old yarn well."

"You didn't believe in it then?"

"No. I'd travelled too much."

"Well, the most of us haven't travelled, and we thought it was all right. Couldn't have believed that pressed men—slaves in a manner of speaking—could have so much spirit. Why, they fight like the devil—at any rate quite as well as us. And from the prisoners and wounded that I have seen, they don't seem very down-trodden neither. *They* don't appear to have much of a grievance!"

"No; why should they?"

"Why, they're forced to fight whether they like it or not, aren't they?"

"That's just it. They're all in the same boat, and they're all doing their best."

"You mean they aren't worried by thinking of the—well—who are we all thinking of?"

"That's what I mean. It's our thoughts of those at home that are worrying us, nothing else."

"I believe you. We are beginning or, I should say, have begun to regret we ever came. Is it the danger, the wounds, the hardships? No! Is it the filth? No! Why, I am lousy—*lousy*, man, and I don't much care! Then, what is it?"—he was overwrought and sleepless, and his voice rose to a husky shout,—"I ask you."

"We all know," said the other somewhat

wearily: he had heard all this several times, and though it was true, repetition was vain. "But it's not much good going over it again. Those that know it best and feel it most perhaps say least."

"You're right," was the reply; "what's the good of talking about it? We did keep the thoughts down at first, when we were full of enthusiasm: but now——!"

There was no immediate answer, and the bootless man was again the first to speak:

"I say."

"Yes."

"Up to talking?"

"Oh yes—may as well."

"There's one or two things I want to know—perhaps you can tell me. I'm a thinking man, mind you, though I've not had your advantages in position and education. I work for my living at home——"

"So do I, though possibly in a different way. Out with it."

"Ought not the people attacking to have the advantage in numbers, about three or four to one, or something of that?"

"Yes, that's the idea."

"We're attacking. Have we got it? It don't look so to me. As far as I've seen they've always had the pull over us so far."

"So they have. They've got far more men than we have."

Then what I say is, why don't we let them attack us? Let them do a bit of the advancing in the open while we do a bit of shooting from the trenches. That sounds right, don't it?"

"It sounds all right: unluckily we can't afford to wait. We must try and finish them off soon, —to wait would be to play their game. As they can reinforce three or four to our one—and better trained men too—every hour goes against us. That's why we are shoving on so hard now. We have marched quick and concentrated here suddenly in order to neutralise this disadvantage, and I suppose we have a few more men here than they have against us at present."

There was again a pause.

"You seem to know a bit. Why aren't you an officer?"

"Perhaps I might have been, but I was quite content to take a rifle. I'm not the only one in this army."

"Where did you get all this that you've been telling me about this attack?"

"Oh, I heard that from two of my own officers when they were discussing their own part of the show. That was miles away: they're on the flank with the regulars."

"I wonder if they feel like we do."

"Who, the officers?"

"No, the regulars."

"A bit, I dare say, but not so much; it's their profession, they run all the risk, of course; but

they haven't sacrificed anything to come out here in the way we have."

There was again a halt in the instruction, and the tobacco-pouch was passed across without reserve now. "Have another fill?" The same exchange was effected, and pipes were again lit.

"However, it all comes back to the same thing in the end. Here we are fighting against fearful odds, and yet they're not a bigger nation than we are, and not so rich by a long way, and all because——"

"Precisely. That's it. You can't get round it."

There was a long silence this time, broken only by distant noises, a rifle-shot or so, and the snoring of sleeping men close by. His pipe was again smoked out, and the man who might have been an officer was immersed in thought when he was startled by a volley of bad language from his companion.

"What's up now?"

"Hullo! Where? Ah—oh—I must 'a dozed off. I was dreaming about my brother."

"Sorry! Curiously enough, I was thinking of two of mine. You don't seem to love your brother!"

After some more language, which was a sad backsliding from the speaker's usual style, he continued ungrammatically but fervently—

"No—I don't. He's one of the sort the thoughts of which are breaking us up. *He* could and should

be 'ere with us. D'you know what he'll likely be doing now?" He spoke in an excited tone, losing some control of his aspirates, and regardless of such a thing as longitude. "He'll 'ave knocked off work—probably 'ave got my job now—he'll 'ave knocked off work, perhaps watched some football, had his tea—high tea—and will be going off to a music-hall. If I know anything about 'im he will have stuck somebody else for the price of a ticket; he always did like somebody else to do the paying—did my brother. At the hall he'll sing patriotic songs with the best of them; then more drinks—some one else paying, mind you—though he's earning good money now—and then the National Anthem." He stopped to take breath. "That's my brother, God bless 'im! and that's what he's doing for his country while you and me are lying worn-out and lousy on a dung-heap. He could have come. He has no wife or kids, and has money saved; but he isn't such a damned fool, he says, as to waste his time and money in training or to fight for other people who stay behind and get all the pickings. If he called me a fool once he must have done it scores of times. I'm not sure but he wasn't right too! That's the sort of fat loafer with the thousands of others like him that we are fighting for as well as the women and the kids and the Old Country mind you." He finished stopless and breathless, then added in a lower voice, "I'm sorry, mate, to give you all this; but when I can't sleep, when I'm resting, all the time when I'm not

actually in the thick of it, the thought of him and his likes is a canker in my mind. I can't get quit of it, and it's always before we go into action, just before the whistle goes, that it gets me worst. Damn 'im! There, I'm through now. Perhaps you feel something of the same sort and understand? Most do nowadays."

The other nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, I know. I have two brothers. One is much the same sort as yours, and is doing the same sort of thing, and it is just before the flag falls that I think most of him. He doesn't have to earn his living. I dare say he has given plenty to the different war funds; but he isn't here! He's just carrying on his life, and amusing himself with sport and games. I expect he was dressing to dine out to-night about the time your brother was having tea, then he may have gone to the music-hall or the theatre, or may have played cards. It's all the same thing. The other one I don't blame so much. He has a family and a big business. Unless other firms did it he could not afford to join himself or let his employés join; he would lose all to his rivals. In his and in most cases it is the whole nation that I blame more than individual shirkers—the fool nation that sits down and expects a few to do the work of the whole lot. You see it comes back to the same thing, and it's the realisation of this that's corroding us. They"—he waved his hand vaguely towards the front of the village—"haven't got these thoughts to worry them. They feel they

have justice for all. We may have been fools not to have seen through it before, but we've got to stick it out now!"

"Yes, we have been fools, but we've learnt a lot, and some of us are pretty near the limit."

No more was said. The two men lay still. Dawn was approaching. The sky was growing lighter, and the various objects round assumed vague shapes. There was a creaking noise up in the roof of the barn: it increased to a sound of snapping.

"Mind yourself—the roof!" shouted the lame soldier, and jumped up. As the other sprang off the straw the roof of the barn fell in with a crash. The thrust of the rafters pushed out large masses of the wall, and the lean-to shelter, just vacated, crumpled up under a shower of bricks. Despite the damp, the air was filled by a choking cloud of dust and dry mortar from the interior of the masonry.

"Get a light from the hospital—that house over there—you're quicker than me," said the lame man as he tried to force the door of the barn, which, opening inwards, was jammed with *débris*. He muttered, "Thought as much. We are all fools here—some a little more than the rest—but all fools." His only answer was the chorus of cries that rose from the mass of masonry and timber inside the building as he shoved at the door.

The grey of the sky had now assumed a greenish tinge when a close rifle-shot rang out, then another. A dropping fire began, and, finally, the rattle of

musketry burst out all round. Shouts arose, whistles were blown. Three shots from a gun near by brought down a fresh cascade of bricks. Forgetting his foot, forgetting even his brother, the lame man dodged the shower and ran for his rifle. The other, now running up with a lantern, fell over the wall into the yard. Quickly scrambling up, he vanished over the enclosure in order to test practically the direction of his loopholes. But the smashed lantern lay where it had fallen, a rivulet of flame sneaking quickly and silently between the cobble-stones towards the heap of straw. A thread of dense smoke crawled softly up the wall of the building, and then the barn itself, the yard, and the immediate neighbourhood were lit up in a fierce orange glare.

The "slaves" were actually making an attempt to recapture the village! The conflagration was the one thing necessary to show up the target for their guns, and bursting shell now added their share to the turmoil round the blazing barn. But its utility even in this direction was short-lived, for each building soon stood out distinct against the light of the coming day.

By this time theatre, music-hall, even cards must have been long over. The brothers and the "host" of others at home were probably in bed and asleep, and, for a short time at least, were not in the thoughts of those playing the game at the front.

Evening is closing in over the little ravine. It is a mere topographic under-feature which would be shown on no map, however large the scale, but one which has assumed great importance for many human beings. There is still plenty of light, enough to see the little flags fluttering on its edge and to see that the tortuous hollow is for some distance full of men. They are some of those who were holding the village down below—that village upon which the enemy made such a desperate but unsuccessful counter-attack at dawn this morning. They have fought their way throughout the day up to close range of the "conscripts'" position, and are now waiting under cover. Some are at the bottom of the hollow, some on one side, some on the other, according to its direction, and they are collected in distinct groups, not distributed over the slopes. There are many places which appear to be avoided by common consent, though it would surely be more comfortable for these weary men to be scattered about at ease instead of being herded together as they are. It is only after the frequent recurrence over these spots of sharp smacking sounds, each accompanied by its little spurt of dust—ghostly grey in the half light—that the reason for their unpopularity becomes obvious. Far from giving the security which such a ravine promises, these spots catch many of the bullets humming down the hillside. The bodies lying there also show that the selection of the exact spots safe from long range, probably un-

aimed rifle-fire, is a matter of trial and error and not of intuition.

One of those who have thus suffered to point the way for others is the man who might have been an officer. For him the final flag has fallen, and he lies face to the earth, head down the slope.

The men in their huddled groups are lying down and squatting between the boulders and bushes. Some, by their attitude of absolute abandonment, show that they have reached the apathetic stage of fatigue: panting, with arms extended, they lie on back or stomach. Others roll their heads from side to side, or rock to and fro muttering. No one talks, and the only near sound to break the monotonous wailing overhead is the smack of stray bullets into the sides of the hollow and the rattle and clank of rifle or dangling shovel as men move. Even in this light it is not a pleasant sight. They are not pleasant men—these soldiers at their last gasp. Tattered, unshaven, and tanned, the congealed blood of wounds scarcely shows. Filthy they are too, not with the honest grime of a day's toil, but with the repulsive accumulation of a much longer period, and the air of the ravine is tainted with the reek of an unwashed crowd.

Though not regulars, the men attacking have done wonders, and are now veterans as good as any professional soldiers in the world: they have almost accomplished the impossible, and have cheerfully suffered every hardship without being

shaken. But a feeling of exasperation has at last crept into their minds and is demoralising them. They feel that they have been made scapegoats. They have been fools, fools, and again Fools.

Soon when ammunition and supports arrive, they will move on again towards their objective. Now they are resting and thinking. These pauses are welcome to tired nature; not so the thoughts which so insistently come with them.

The man without the boot has arrived safe so far, and is sitting at the bottom of the hollow. He has not seen his chance bedfellow and mentor of last night since the alarm early this morning, and has even forgotten his existence. He is at present fully occupied with his own affairs. There is no hurry: he scoops out a small hollow in the ground at his side, and unwinding the dirty bandage places his foot against the damp, cool gravel. It is not much, perhaps, but it is better than the constriction of the heated rag which has pressed it for hours. He clasps the other knee, closes his eyes, and—thinks.

It seems a long time that they have to wait in this shelter. The three things that they now require most are — ammunition, reinforcements, and water. Though it is of the last that each man personally most feels the need, he will only get it if it arrives before the other two; once supports and cartridges come up there will be no waiting for water. At last there is some commotion in the hollow — it is ammunition arriving.

It is distributed in silence, and silently and mechanically are the bandoliers filled. But no supports come up. Before it gets quite dark a vague shadow passes high up over the hollow in the ground. It is visible, and by no means noiseless; but, perhaps owing to the din all round, possibly owing to the general apathy, no notice is taken of it. No one shoots upwards, no bombs are dropped, and the shape floats away up the hill, probably to report to the hostile artillery the exact spot where this section of the attack has so mysteriously gone to earth and whence it will suddenly issue forth. Still they wait, and still the Commander, who is now connected by telephone with the rear, anxiously inquires as to supports. Those of the men who are not too self-absorbed listen for the roar of the guns behind, which will cover the advance of reinforcements. It does not begin. Reinforcements are not easy to find in this army even when urgently required.

A gentle rain begins to fall and the air grows cold. The man with the bare foot continues to mutter. Though he is becoming chilled and stiff, he does not notice the rain; his foot feels cool, and he carefully rewraps it in the now wet rag. Those round him are digging out little hollows in the ground to catch the rain-water, and are sucking the wet pebbles. He does not notice. The little hollows slowly turn to shallow pools, and the strange spectacle is offered of a herd of men on all-fours lapping from the ground with sucking noises.

He does not notice. Suddenly he is brought to actualities. A feeling of collapse grips him: he feels unaccountably ill, forlorn, unmanned: his body sways. Is he going to faint? Involuntarily he stretches out a hand to steady himself and puts it into something quite cold. He looks down: he is seated in a trickle of muddy water. To have the head or the whole body wet is nothing, but to be seated in cold water is of all things that best calculated to take the heart out of a man. He grasps the cause of his sudden depression, and turning over slowly on all-fours he laps from the mud and the gravel, then seizes his rifle and crawls stiffly on to the bank.

The reinforcements have at last started. The telephone has said so to the Commander, and the sudden roar of their own guns behind conveys the message to the rest. A few orders are passed down, and most of the attackers crawl up below the edge of one bank and begin shooting. They can barely see the enemy's position above, owing to the curve of the hill; but they know the range roughly, and can help their comrades' advance by their fire.

Presently one panting man — the first of the supports — drops into the hollow from its lower edge; then others arrive in twos, threes, dozens. All blown, many wounded, they stumble into the ravine. There are too many now for any careful selection of resting-places; the newcomers, moreover, do not know of the dangerous spots in this

twisting crack in the hillside. Several come untouched across the open only to be struck down as soon as they reach the haven of refuge, and it is no longer into the hard ground of the exposed spots that the bullets smack. The bearers again become busy. More and more soldiers drop into the hollow, until it is crowded.

If the shape which fluttered overhead only a short time back has done its duty, now is the time for the enemy's artillery to open upon this mass of men crowded together. But no shrapnel whistles its way down to rain a vertical death upon them, no high-explosive shell arrives to tear them into fragments. Possibly the enemy wish them to move out first and become visible, the better to shatter them with direct gun and rifle-fire, and then with the cold steel of the counterstroke. At any rate there is now a respite, for their own guns, covering the advance of reinforcements, have ceased to shoot, now that the latter have reached the safety of the ravine. Their assistance will be much more needed in a few minutes, and ammunition is precious.

During this respite — this breathing-space — which, as all feel, is the calm before the storm, every man is silent. Time drags even to the most weary. Why don't they go on? Why doesn't the whistle sound? It is just before the flag falls, or that dread moment before the plunge—far worse than the plunge itself—which is always recurring in war, but which never loses its terrors. At such

a moment men act variously according to their temperaments, and derive no comfort from the propinquity of a crowd. Death is very near, and if met at all will be met alone, and each soul is isolated, solitary. The general silence gives an impression of apathy, which is belied by the few who mutter prayers or blaspheme at the delay. They are taking this last moment according to their nature. When the whistle blows they will act alike—as they have done before. None but the dead and wounded will remain behind.

One man stoops to adjust the bandage on his bootless foot. It is not really necessary; but he has a prejudice against being tripped up or being forced to advance barefooted over stones. It may seem superfluous for any thought to be given to such things when the air will soon be thick with whistling death; but it is at such moments that trifles obtrude themselves. Refastening the bandage, he gives it a pat, then stands up. He keeps swallowing, though he has nothing in his mouth. It is now all but dark. The guns behind roar. The enemy's artillery, however, only reply with star-shell, which light up the hillside; it is infantry that they are thirsting for at present, and they bide their time. The very raindrops sparkle as they fall in the glare of the searchlights: it is the supreme moment; but even the consciousness that they are "playing the game" does not seem to inspire those waiting for the call: they are going into it cold-blooded this time.

A whistle sounds faintly, then sounds again. The shrill noise grips the man with the bandaged leg and intensifies the thoughts that obsess him, reminding him of the football field, of Home, and —his brother. Mechanically he starts to climb the bank a little behind the others; then hesitates. Why should he go on? Why should *he* endure all this? He lies down deliberately as do hundreds of others, for the feeling now raised by the whistle is not peculiar to him alone. It is the Limit.

The rest climb on and, head down to avoid being dazzled, rush forward into the glare, their bodies shown in relief as they top the bank. The wailing sound in the air rises to a continuous shriek, its intensity some indication of the special slaughter which always awaits a weak assault beaten back.

THE END.

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